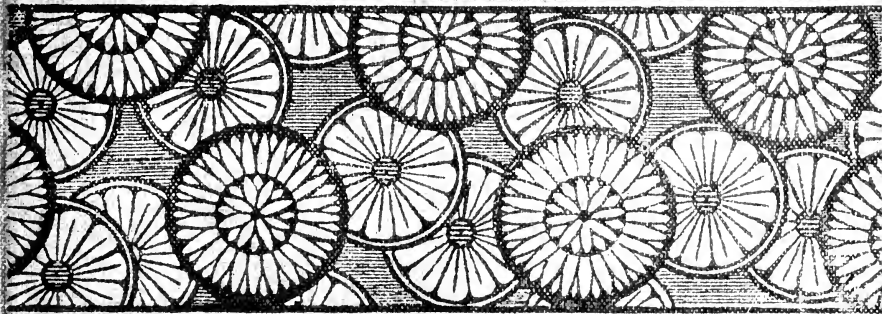


LOVE'S LOYALTY

CECIL CLARKE





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LOVE'S LOYALTY.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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GRIFFITH FARRAN OKEDEN & WELSH
NEWBERY HOUSE, CHARING CROSS ROAD
LONDON AND SYDNEY

LOVE'S LOYALTY

BY

CECIL CLARKE

AUTHOR OF

'ELSIE GREY,' 'ULRICA,' 'THE LITTLE ALPINE FOX DOG,'
'WHEN ALL WAS YOUNG,'
'GREAT-HEART AND HIS LITTLE FRIENDS,' ETC.

All-conquering Love! Who shall withstand thee when, armed with
Heaven's might, thou knockest at man's conscience-gate.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON
GRIFFITH FARRAN OKEDEN & WELSH
NEWBERRY HOUSE, CHARING CROSS ROAD
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LOVE'S LOYALTY.



CHAPTER I.

BORN IN THE BONE.

WHATEVER may have been Henry Wodehouse's failings, and they were, it must be frankly owned, many and varied, no one could accuse him of a want of faith in his own powers to benefit mankind, through '(as he put it so neatly) 'the wholesome channels of journalism.' He was also blessed with a sanguine temperament, which, in due course, enabled him to shake off the vexations consequent upon the disastrous failure of the 'Pilot,' when he at once began to look round after some similar outlet for his talents.

As we know, he had felt deeply the cruel aspersions cast upon the conduct of affairs in that his latest, and best beloved, venture. But he was not a man to allow any private feelings of mortification to stand in the way of service towards his fellow-men. Why should a clique of chicken-hearted investors, led—as he had once told Mr Rushworth, when in a sadly mocking and irreverent mood—by an 'officious sky-pilot,' try to baulk the

enlightenment of thousands? These people must be taught a broader lesson of charity, from the spectacle of his own unselfish devotion to the good cause. What were their paltry losses compared with the ruin of his ambitions? Had not he as serious a stake in the concern as they—not, it is true, in hard cash, but none the less important for all that? The intellect of this indomitable promoter was obviously wasted upon so censorious hair-splitting a crew as these grasping creditors and accountants, who were picking every vestige of meat from the defunct 'Pilot's' bones, with quite a wolfish disregard to the claims of the real owners of the carcass. Here was one more instance, in his own experience, how individual enterprise was rewarded. No, he would wash his hands of the whole business, and leave the vultures to squabble over the spoil to their hearts' content. Henry decided to make the Continent his permanent abode. Men were, perhaps, less discriminating over there in their dealings; the law kindlier in its operations. In the opinion of many of his companions at Circe's Crib, and similar haunts, England no longer offered the attractions it did as a happy hunting-ground for the bold financier. Even his daughters, from some inexplicable cause, failed to appreciate the soundness of his advice in respect of their investments, which might have been quadrupled ere now had they but listened to reason. Alas, he feared they must have inherited much of their regrettable obstinacy from his misguided Celia, who, poor soul, was always so prone to seek the aid of others, when she had a doting husband only too willing to advise her. For example his heart quite ached to think what chances

those two had lost of making their fortunes—and his own—during the recent boom in mines, when shares so long quoted at ridiculously low figures had, as Henry prophesied they would, at last attracted the notice they deserved, bringing recompense to the knowing ones, with, if possible, increased patronage of the Crib. In a convivial sense, he had certainly benefited by the operations of his associates, who, in newly-acquired affluence, were generous to a fault in their treatings. But, after all, the delights of excess are only transitory. To so practised an imbibor, it took a deal of drinking before his cares were drowned in the proverbial waters of oblivion. The enjoyment of practising his caustic rejoinders upon his former ally, the versatile Rushworth, was also denied him; for that worthy, finding neither English nor Parisian attractions to his taste, had started off to the Cape in disgust, without even the gratification of first squaring matters with his implacable enemies the accountants. How anybody could fail to appreciate Paris as a residence, passed Henry's comprehension altogether. The frequent visits he had paid, in his capacity of managing-director, to that alluring capital, had convinced him that it was, above all, the place for enlightened people to dwell in. For his part, he had contrived to get through an amount of dissipation there which less hardened mortals would scarcely have survived. What was more commendable, he never failed to put in an appearance at the 'Pilot's' offices at the usual hour, as spruce and unruffled as if nothing exceptional had occurred overnight. The fact is. Henry was equally an epicure in vice as well as virtue, taking care to eat and drink the very best of everything his entertainer's purse could supply.

Indeed, he carried to perfection the art of living upon other people, with that more consummate accomplishment of never letting his friends consider themselves other than his debtors after they rose from the festive board. Was he not, when in the vein, the cheeriest of companions, gifted with a glib, if somewhat acid, humour and flow of racy anecdote—attractions fully cancelling any vulgar indebtedness in the matter of dinner bills? Owing, also, to a master-stroke of foresight, when first introducing the 'Pilot' to the notice of certain religious supporters, he had secured unanimous election to one of the most respectable, exclusive clubs in London, which, consequently, made him free of another, though more worldly, place in Paris. As the avowed object of the 'Ecclesiastical' was 'to maintain the Protestant Reformed Faith, whilst upholding the principles of the Constitution throughout England and Europe,' surely, had the committee searched the wide world over, no better man than Henry Wodehouse could have been found to assist their views. Yet—will it be credited?—when their organ got into pecuniary difficulties, these same men who were so eager for his admission, clamoured as loudly for his immediate withdrawal. They soon found, however, to their sorrow, how much easier it is to elect a member than to get rid of him. Henry held on to his privileges with a tenacity beyond all praise. What was the use of belonging to an influential club if it did not admit you into the best circles everywhere? he justly argued.

Once having decided to quit London for an indefinite period, it did not take Henry long to carry out his intention. Fortunately for his peace of mind,

it was part of his philosophy never to allow such mundane trifles as liabilities to worry him. He had, in all emergencies, been accustomed to act with promptitude; the adroit manner in which he slipped off abroad, without flurry or previous announcement, not excepted. As to leave-takings, they were his especial abominations. If it had not been so, he might often have found his movements seriously hampered through the presence of friends, who appeared to only fully appreciate him when his departure became imminent. It is true he wrote another touching appeal to his children, entreating them to reconsider their heartless conduct, asking for a small sum of ready money, on loan. But beyond a formal acknowledgment from that beggarly lawyer, through whom all overtures had still to be made, nothing resulted. So Henry had no choice but to hurriedly pack up his somewhat extravagant wardrobe—he was particular in respect to dress—and depart, carrying his abhorrence of parting scenes so far as not even to bid good-bye to his landlady. He did, however, airily inform the drudge who helped the cabman downstairs with the neatly-appointed luggage, that she might expect him back before long. She might, though the number of Mr Wodehouse's pieces suggested the contrary. These were his parting words: 'My best remembrances to Mrs Pybus, Susan. Mind you say how sorry I was to be obliged to go without the pleasure of saying good-bye; tell her, also, I will remit the trifling balance of her account—promptly. But tides and tidal trains, my dear, wait for no man, as you may not have learnt yet. There are a few odds and ends on the toilet-table. Pray accept them, with my blessing. No, I will not

leave my address ; thank you for suggesting the precaution, all the same. Chatham-Dover, main line, cabman.'

The mere thought of a trip abroad always put Henry in good spirits. He waved his hand quite festively to the girl, who had already decided that this was quite the 'pleasantest-spoken gent' of her acquaintance. The few cast-off neckties and gloves with which, from time to time, Mr Wodehouse rewarded her services in place of coin, found their way to the young man she kept company with, surrounded by quite a halo of romantic associations. 'It wasn't for the likes of her, of course, to argue with gentlefolks,' Susan reasoned with herself as she watched the cab drive away with this genteel lodger, but she did think as how missus had been 'a bit rough' on him when she made those persistent applications for rent, which seemed to vex the gentleman so. But missus' views and her own differed so widely on many points—for example, as to the precise duration of a 'Sunday-evening-out'—that one disagreement, more or less, could be of little moment.

If Henry felt gay at only the prospect of change, how thoroughly happy must he have been when he found himself being driven once more through the streets of Paris, in the greyness of early morning. It was creditable to him that he could thus so easily throw off his worries. For it must be remembered how often he had been the sport of an evil fate, passing through adversities which would have tried stronger men than he. But it was his constant aim to rise above circumstances ; nobody could say where was the limit to his soaring. Even the sight of the familiar kiosks

acted as a fillip in this direction. Already, in his mind's eye, he saw a larger and more influential journal rising from the ashes of the 'Pilot,' and selling there in its thousands, trumpeting his doctrines 'throughout the length and breath of Europe.' If he could only find someone who would really trust him, he would work the newspaper himself, free from the drag of a lot of fussy shareholders. There must be plenty of rich people about with capital at command, which might as well—nay, much better—be employed in such a beneficial speculation. That very day he would begin his disinterested search after them.

What delightful reminiscences poured in upon the man as he glided over the asphalt of the Boulevards. There, at his elbow, was the noted Frontin's into whose cellar he had dived so often when bent upon nocturnal amusement combined with business. Except for the gay ladies seated at the reeking tables, this might have been the Crib itself transported to the Continent, with all its adjuncts of inferior tobacco, choice oaths, and poisonous drinks. Nor was the male society to be found in this stuffy saloon more select. For down those fateful steps passed sharpers, thieves, *viveurs* innumerable, to reappear fuddled and dishevelled when the morning light was struggling for mastery with the gas lamps. Henry remembered with pride how many a time he had come up smiling from those brilliant shades the wisest and most sober in a bibulous company of revellers. How he had laughed in his sleeve to see his boon companions stagger homewards under the kindly guidance of their painted charmers, when he, all the while, was so cool and steady. What fools

they were ; how his earnings over the dice-box paid a well-deserved and substantial compliment to his own superior astuteness.

Yes, those were rollicking days, of a truth. They would come round again, sure enough, after a few visits to the Bourse. He knew plenty of outsiders there, who had the ear of their luckier brethren inside the official, yet exclusive, 'Basket,' where those excitable idiots yelled themselves hoarse over their bargains. When Henry looked down upon that exhilarating scene from the gallery, he longed to be one of them, if only to be admitted on the floor of that Temple of Plungers. The tortures of Tantalus were trifling compared with this restricted glimpse into Paradise. These French beggars certainly beat his own countrymen hollow in their unquenchable thirst for gambling. In other respects their habits might leave much to be desired, but such a quality atoned for all shortcomings. Narrow-minded people had been known to denounce this spirit of enterprise, going so far as to assert that some operators took advantage of their proclivities. Could anything be more unchristianlike? Henry would like to make those detractors have just one day's experience of the worries of a lively market, say when a war scare was on. Then they might judge if profits were not fairly earned. Of course there always would be flats in the world—the French called them by the quaint name of *gogos*—and in Mr Wodehouse's opinion it was a perfectly legitimate performance to play upon them, as a judgment for their gullibility. Of what use otherwise were the anxious calculations of years? Certainly brains should be well paid for. He did not propose selling

his own too cheaply; that would be the most culpable of weaknesses. Projectors were, at anyrate, entitled to this recognition on the part of the public.

Little fish are proverbially sweet. On this principle, our friend preferred angling for gudgeons, who bit freer, and were less troublesome on the hook. Henry's most successful baskets had always been made amongst the smaller fry of the investing world—results directly opposed to the magnitude of his inspirations, which, one might have fancied, would not have been satisfied with such easy victories. Hence it was that the glimpses he got of the many huge banking-houses gave him but scant delight. Rather, they reminded him of sundry vexatious visits when engaged in bolstering up the affairs of the 'Pilot,' notably in connection with bills, which, although properly drawn and accepted, had, oddly enough, not been met at maturity with that readiness one might have expected.

Naturally—it is often the case with gentlemen who live by their wits—the visitor put up at one of the cosiest hotels in the capital. Presumably, also, he paid his bills there, or offered some satisfactory equivalent. For, even at that early hour, he was received with the customary smiling obeisance which French caterers cultivate to such perfection. Alas, so ready a welcome had not been his everywhere. In the dark hours of the 'Pilot's' adversity, many owners of the well-puffed establishments had meanly declined to harbour him longer, because contracts made for advertisements had, as they contended, been violated. The fact is, Henry had a pet hotel column, which he took under his special charge. Into

this he would at times lure some unsuspecting host, where, under cover of apparently gratuitous display, he unconsciously acted as decoy-duck for other opposition inns the paper was anxious to secure. In order that the obligation might not be all on one side, Henry ran up a contra for his own board and lodging, an arrangement which, besides soon palling upon his host, created feelings of resentment on the part of the shareholders. Things reaching this recriminative stage, the managing-director was perforce obliged to move on elsewhere, when he not unfrequently fell back upon his trump card, some newly-started 'high-class pension, conducted by the widow of a distinguished military officer, whom circumstances,' etc. There, on the strength of personal appearance and agreeable manners, he was always sure of a welcome. He could also reduce his expenses to a minimum by wheedling the proprietress into putting him on the free list for meals, as a set-off for keeping her guests diverted during those, to her, anxious periods. Anybody connected with the press was such an attraction in a mixed gathering. Writers were always so chatty and full of anecdote, invaluable qualities when a tableful of people, captiously disposed as to viands, was considered. How shocked that widow and her boarders would have been had they suspected that Henry's nights were spent in some of the prettiest hells of Paris. How his enlivening gossip—duly pruned, of course, to suit the susceptibilities of his audience—was for the most part picked up at the bars of those many English taverns which grace certain parts of the city.

But on that visit our traveller need not fall

back upon quarters in which his talents found such restricted scope. For the young men who kept the *Hôtel des Trois Hémisphères* believed (at present) strongly in this persuasive journalist, who had conclusively proved to them that continued fidelity to the columns of the 'Pilot' was the only sure road to fortune. What if the newspaper had stopped its issue for a while? It was to blossom forth shortly in all the pride of matured opinions, new heading, and type. If messieurs only stuck faithfully to it, there was no limit to the patronage which might not be expected. They might even have to enlarge their premises, or be able to carry out the dream of their lives by migrating to the spacious avenue adjoining; no amount of affluence was too much to expect as the result of a standing two-inch advertisement, for which the scale of charges was so ludicrously disproportionate. That was the line of argument Henry proposed to take in case those enterprising youths proved refractory, or showed signs of jibbing from the former liberal-spirited terms arranged with their lamented uncle. As a matter of fact, custom had already resulted from the nephews' association with the 'Pilot.' For one of its canvassers had stayed there a whole week, commissioned to crack up the paper on every available opportunity, whilst enjoined not to disclose his identity, under pain of instant dismissal: if that wasn't being bound body and soul to his employers, the unfortunate touter did not know what slavery was. But being a needy man, with a family, he accepted his position, nobly acting the part of disinterested stranger—it must in justice be added—to the letter. It is scarcely

necessary to say from whose fertile brain this and similar plans emanated.

After Henry had freshened himself up a bit, and taken just one dram to ward off the danger of a possible chill during his journey—his was a valuable life; it behoved him, in the interest of thousands, to be careful of himself—he strolled leisurely down to the Place de la Bourse. After all, he thought, these Frenchmen were in many respects very sensible fellows. Here they were in the liveliest spirits, positively itching for speculation, with the day still young, before their English and American visitors had even begun to stuff themselves with their heavy breakfasts. Just a cup of coffee, with a roll, then out they bundled to their offices, or, better still, to spend an exciting morning under the well-known façade. There was some sense in getting up early with the chance of turning over a pile of francs before noon. Henry admired this typical feature of their characters immensely, it so entirely confirmed his oft-expressed opinion that those who 'got on' to the market the soonest were the ones to be envied. That morning, however, he could only afford a hurried glance at the crowd of *boursiers* and their *gogos*, who intermingled about the massive pillars of the Exchange. Business called him, by appointment, into an opposite corner, where, on the fourth floor, dwelt a wire-puller likely enough to help him in his efforts to establish a worthy successor to the 'Pilot,' and introduce him to those capitalists who were to have the honour of assisting in so praiseworthy an attempt.

Few firms could boast of so interesting a collection of clients as did Messrs Fortescue Jones & Co. Only

those who have had experience of certain dark phases of life in a great city can realise into what compromising straits its silent vices may lead alike the greenhorn or the knave. A fine opening always exists, in consequence, for a money-lender and general adjuster of difficulties, who can combine the useful qualifications of discretion and shrewdness with an exhaustive knowledge of those many loopholes of the law through which escape is opened to the embarrassed. All these advantages Mr Jones—the Co., like a good many others, only existed in name—possessed to the full. Indeed, as a receptacle for secrets, his brain might well have rivalled old Tulkinghorne's. Most of the business which found its way into Fortescue's den was decidedly shady; but that was not his fault, rather of those who brought it there. His own dealings with his fellow-men were quite above-board, as he was not bashful in mentioning. People ought not, therefore, to have begrudged him his worldly prosperity. If his clients thought fit to confide in him, and he successfully extricated them from folly or improvidence, it was but just that he should be well rewarded for his services. It was clearly unfair to accuse Mr Jones of taking advantage of those who, driven into a corner, were ready to mortgage their very souls to him rather than face an exposure. It was equally ungenerous to rake up the gentleman's antecedents. What if he had been struck off the rolls of his native town owing to some ridiculous squeamishness on the part of the Court of Chancery? He could easily have cleared himself with a little more of that desirable commodity—time. Trust funds were, of course, awkward things to tamper with. But to

speak of misappropriation and Fortescue Jones in the same breath was too grievous a calumny. The worst that could be laid at his door was a want of prudence in his investments, and the best of us are liable to mistakes of that kind. At anyrate, even if his ostracism were, as some alleged, well deserved, nobody could rob him of that invaluable stock of legal knowledge which, as a sharp practitioner in a busy place, he had duly acquired, and now retained for his benefit. Nor was it altogether courteous to infer that, because he drove close bargains, the money-lender had no heart. How could that be, when he was a liberal supporter of so many Parisian hospitals and charities? Slander could surely go no further, when it whispered that this was only done to throw dust in the eyes of the authorities; that he even owed the decoration in his buttonhole to a consummate mastery over the arts of cajolery. Such disgraceful libels deserved to be shown up for the public good. It would have been quite in Mr Jones's old line to have worked his own case, won the day too, had any of his detractors compromised themselves on paper.

As may be imagined, Henry Wodehouse had a great admiration for this individual, who, with the millstone of a tarnished reputation round his neck, had yet managed to place himself upon a pedestal of such unassailable respectability. It was for this reason, that whilst inwardly cursing the fad which induced the ex-solicitor to dwell so near the sky, he adjusted his most conciliatory smile as he mounted the stairs.

'My very dear sir, it seems ages since we met—how are you?' were the first words of greeting.

‘You look as well as ever. Crossed last night, I suppose?’

‘Yes; a deuced rough time we had of it. When will they put decent boats on the night service?’

‘When, indeed. You must agitate for an improvement in your excellent journal, Mr Wodehouse. By the way, how goes it with our friend? Circulation brisk, I hope?’

As a matter of fact, Mr Jones had the history of the paper at his finger ends. More than once Henry or his editor had applied to him, in great distress, to help them out of some scrape with the French officials, which, for a ready-money consideration, he had done, though it was no easy job. He knew also perfectly well that the advice he had given after the last tussle had not been followed, and that, in consequence of the shareholders’ action, the inevitable crash had come. But it suited him then to feign ignorance of the catastrophe; and he did this so naturally as to deceive Henry himself, which is paying no mean compliment to the ex-solicitor’s powers of dissimulation.

‘Unfortunately, just now we are compelled to stop the issues,’ the promoter explained, adding however gaily, ‘only for a while, of course. We shall go on presently, better than ever.’

‘Dear, dear, I am much concerned. From what you have told me from time to time, I quite thought you were a power upon the Continent.’

‘So we were. Shall be again very shortly—stronger than ever. That’s what I’ve come over to talk to you about. All we want from the investing public is money and—confidence.’

Fortescue Jones & Co. smiled.

'A good deal of the first, with not much of the other, I suppose. If you only knew how many people come to me with those two modest requests. Well, we must see presently what can be done. Kindly excuse me for a few moments. Amuse yourself with to-day's "Detonator," hot from the press.'

The 'Detonator' indeed! Henry would sooner have read the 'Guardian' through, from cover to finish, than touch his detested rival, whose prosperity had helped so largely in his own journal's downfall. As to extracting any amusement from its columns, his scribes had standing instructions to hold it up to contempt, as the acme of everything that was commonplace, dull, and old womanish in journalism. Why, there wasn't a smile in it from one year's end to another.

Failing the distraction proposed, Henry made a tour of inspection round his friend's rooms—an invariable practice with him when left alone under similar conditions; you see, his was such an inquiring mind.

'The old fox certainly does the thing in style. If it wasn't for the safe, one might be at the Mirliton's: choice prints and water-colours, *bric-à-brac ad. lib.*, inlaid cabinets, nice soft-pile Turkey carpet. What's this? "French Protestant Church, Neuilly." Ah, that must be the pious Fortescue's place of worship. And, by Jove! a Bible on the mantelpiece. I never knew he was a commissioner of oaths before—at least, not that sort of administrator of them. I wonder where he keeps his liquor? I'm as dry as a lime-kiln.'

Meanwhile, Mr Jones had stepped round the corner to prospect, not with the faintest intention of finding

a capitalist offhand for his visitor, but to prime himself as to Mr Wodehouse's exact position, whether his tale was a genuine one, and so on: he might be running away from his creditors, or fifty things. To ascertain which, he telegraphed in cipher to a Hebrew relative in Fleet Street, who knew more about newspaper affairs than many Christians. Fortescue never relied upon anybody's unconfirmed statement in these delicate matters, and rightly or wrongly, he fancied Mr Wodehouse was a slippery customer.

Returned from this errand, Henry began to unfold his scheme with much detail, and—considering its infancy, and his recent discomfiture—an amazing amount of belief in its success. Mr Jones listened with great patience. He wisely wanted to hear all the promoter had to say, without expressing an opinion one way or the other until he had got his answer from Fleet Street. When his sanguine friend stopped and asked him point-blank whether he did not think there was money in it, he inquired in quite an exasperating fashion, and with a French shrug of his shoulders,—

‘My dear sir, how can I tell you until you show me some figures to go by? With men of business that is, of course, the first consideration.’

‘Figures be— We'll go into them presently. Haven't I proved as plain as a pikestaff the thing can't fail, with the support I'm promised?’

‘Well, you see, a great deal depends upon the nature of the promises made; whether they are backed up with something more substantial. Mere names upon a prospectus are, for example, often valueless. I have known them positively misleading.’

What a prosy old humbug this was. Surely the bait was tempting enough for even a money-lender to jump at. Could he be indulging in a sly dig at Henry's recent directorate, headed by the titled Montgomery? Mr Jones's countenance revealed nothing. He was meditatively tapping a bejewelled finger upon the desk, his eyes towards the door.

'Who's to be your new editor?' he inquired presently.

Henry stroked his moustache.

'They're such tyrannical beggars. I've as good as made up my mind to work the post myself, and save expenses—for a time anyhow.'

'Ah!' exclaimed the other.

There was a deal of meaning behind the ejaculation. It seemed to convey a certain contempt for the proposed arrangement the reverse of complimentary. The fact is, he had little faith in his visitor's editorial capabilities. Although his motives must have been excellent—instance that touching prologue to the first issue of the 'Pilot'—in his few contributions, Henry had rarely produced anything strikingly impressive. His work, strangely enough, was limited to hotel puffs, or occasional Society paragraphs, which, however spicy and entertaining, cannot be classed with the highest forms of literature, or be said to have furthered those high-minded objects for which the paper was founded.

Indeed, more than once the editor had rebelled, refusing his copy because he would not keep his ideas in sufficiently sober grooves. Truth to tell, with all his great gifts, this man was no scholar, also a more than indifferent speller. Witness a letter he had once sent to this very Fortescue

in which he had called somebody—luckily not the recipient—a ‘plausable liar.’ Such a slip, besides being deliciously libellous, was not calculated to increase one’s trust in a writer’s resources. Mr Wodehouse’s style was, indeed, quite out of harmony with the principles he professed to promulgate, affecting that more caustic personal vein, in which he sought relief from toil in the pleasures of the table. This might account for the loss of caste with the supporters of the journal, many of whom asserted that he was a traitor to that very cause he had advocated so fervently in the past. Had his effusions ever appeared in print, he would unquestionably have dragged the ‘Pilot’ into notoriety; but it would have been of that unenviable kind only reached through the Law Courts. Beyond a doubt, Henry’s great forte was the drawing up of flowery prospectuses, in which accomplishment he had few rivals. This, however, after all, offers but a limited sphere, even in the most speculative centres.

‘You will find your duties arduous, I fancy,’ Mr Jones continued drily. ‘Where do you propose to publish—this time?’

‘Where? Why, in Paris again, of course—the only city worth a rap. Geneva’s no good now, not much better than Brussels.’

Again Mr Jones said ‘Ah!’ in that irritating way of his. Then his clerk knocked at the double doors, bringing in a telegram.

‘You will excuse?’ Then, with a sigh, ‘Another summons from the notary. People will get into difficulties, Mr Wodehouse, even in France.’

In reality, he had read on the paper, ‘Played

out. Don't touch it,' which made him wishful to close the interview.

Henry, perceiving this, suddenly changed his front. He began accusing Mr Jones of drawing him out for his own ends, thus wasting his valuable time to no purpose. In fact, he got into a passion, which, being suppressed, made him sarcastic and offensive. The money-lender took up his hat.

'My dear sir,' he said, 'has not experience taught you that the man who loses his temper is to be greatly pitied, because he does himself more harm than the object of his wrath? I am sure you will see the truth of that when you are a bit cooler? Adolphe, the door, please, for Monsieur Wodehouse. I am so sorry this interruption has occurred to cut short our very pleasant chat. All success to the new paper—when it comes out.'

Almost before he knew where he was, the Englishman found himself on the stairs.

Here was an unproductive morning. He could have sworn this preachy humbug would have helped him: he was so thoroughly in with the class of investors Henry wanted to reach. He wished, now it was too late, that he had shown him the famous statement of affairs which had dazzled the original proprietors of the 'Pilot.' It looked so imposing, made out in francs; and what if the compiler had romanced a little on the right side in respect of circulation? The result was far short of what might reasonably be expected from its successor, now hatching. Perhaps the old boy was huffy at not being tipped in advance: these financing beggars were always so grasping—regular sweaters for avarice. Well, he must see

what could be done without an intermediary. If he had any luck, he might pick up an investor outside the Bourse, and snap his fingers at Messieurs Fortescue Jones & Co.

But this was not to be. Henry found that most of the speculators had deserted the temple of Mammon for the all-important claims of breakfast; that even the 'Basket' was empty—a circumstance which made him still more angry, as he might have fallen in with an invitation. Everybody knows what a fine opportunity the coffee and cigar period offers for discussing business with a Frenchman.

Poor Henry! What a deal of trouble and vexation he was enduring for the sake of others. Had he not been the most persevering of mortals, he must long ago have given in. It certainly is wonderful what some men will suffer in the wake of honest conviction. Here was a forcible example of how just the want of capital and faith clogged the wheels of a really great inspiration, reducing its originator to the depressing necessity of having to chew the cud of discontent as he walked the streets of Paris breakfastless.

It was no doubt annoying, but scarcely excused the many stirring curses levelled at the innocent head of Fortescue Jones & Co., as the immediate cause of the disaster. To make matters worse, Henry strolled, in an absent frame of mind, on to that very Boulevard where the 'Pilot' had flourished for a while under his enlightened rule. There was the lowered shutter, with that objectionable little *affiche*, which politely intimated bankruptcy to the paper, still stuck to it. To add to his distress, one

of the flaring contents bills lay upon the floor of the office. Henry remembered the very issue. With a sigh he turned sorrowfully away. That had been an exceptionally spirited number—it was during the journal's death-struggle for popularity—on which great, though, alas, visionary, hopes had been centred. It really seemed as if quite a cycle of worries had set in again for Henry Wodehouse that afternoon.

But good-fortune was not far off. For, rounding the corner of the Rue Scribe, who should he come against but the Honourable Montgomery Spooner, glass-in-eye as usual, dressed 'up to the knocker,' as his friends often said of him. Now this well-nurtured aristocrat still thought himself aggrieved at the treatment he had undergone at the hands of the promoter. He was constantly urging his monetary claims upon him for services rendered whilst on the directorate of the 'Pilot'—communications which Henry as studiously ignored. But although behind his back he dubbed Mr Spooner a brainless noodle, and cordially detested him, it was not to his interests then, hard pressed as he was for a meal, to show resentment. Accordingly, he again called up his ever-ready smile, and met his quondam colleague's somewhat domineering, 'Hullo, Wodehouse, you here?' with a conciliatory air distinctly creditable.

'My dear fellow'—fancy 'fellow'-ing a peer's son!—'this is indeed a pleasure. Over on the spree, I suppose? Going into Coyney's? I thought of taking a snack there myself.'

The audacity of this individual. The honourable's glass fell from his eye in sheer dismay. As a matter of fact, he was dropping in as usual to the popular

tavern mentioned to pick up, over a brandy and soda, the latest tip for the Cambridgeshire. Those tight-trouserred, horsey gentlemen who frequented the bar, and appeared to know the fast side of Paris life as thoroughly as he did, which was paying them no mean compliment, were his advisers-in-chief. In the most natural manner in the world, Henry established himself as his guest. He was soon washing down a couple of those kidneys for which Mr Coyney's grill was renowned with a tankard of equally superlative ale. Mr Spooner merely trifled with a devilled biscuit.

'That's better,' exclaimed Henry, refreshed. 'Reminds one of old times, doesn't it? After all, this sort of fare isn't to be despised. You're not getting on very gaily with yours, though. Feel a bit chippy, perhaps?'

The youth had certainly made rather a heavy night of it, though it was like this creature's impertinence to presume to criticise his present condition: when would these plebeians be taught a proper respect for blue blood?

It was an edifying lesson to watch how the promoter speedily weaned his companion from the haughty attitude assumed to quite a friendly, even rollicking mood. Henry knew his man so well, you see. He therefore humoured his somewhat fastidious palate with just the sort of lively chatter his intellect could grasp. Finding himself bored, Mr Spooner would inevitably have risen, to leave the other saddled with the unwelcome liability of a liberal lunch. As it was, things took quite a convivial turn. Though inwardly lamenting his absence from the spot where his talents would have found greater scope, Henry

did not underrate the value of patching up his acquaintance with this festive spark, who owned to having had a 'high old time of it' at Auteuil the day previously. Only once, and then in a half-apologetic manner, did he allude to his unsettled claim for fees. He was quickly pacified with the assurance that he would certainly rank as a creditor to the estate, which, somehow, sounded a very important position to occupy. On learning that his much-tried companion had actually forfeited his like hard-earned remuneration, Mr Spooner naturally felt quite ashamed of himself for having even broached the subject.

'You have given me an opportunity of enlisting your services in a matter very near my heart at the present moment,' Henry continued, changing from the gay to the official persuasive manner with really masterly ease. 'I am going to once more presume upon your well-known interest in pure-toned literature, Mr Spooner, to introduce—'

'Oh, I say, draw it mild. Not another "Pilot" yet awhile, Wodehouse? That's rather beyond a joke.'

'You are not far wrong. Ask yourself, sir, with your exceptional reasoning powers, wouldn't it be a crying shame to give up just as we've got the thin end of the wedge in, with that darned—beg pardon, widely read—"Detonator" getting all the plums out of our enterprise, instead of being swamped with the backwash of our prosperity, as the skunk deserves to be? Just put that to yourself, calmly, without undue bias. I'd stake my last farthing on making a stir this time. Just look here, please.' Out came an imposing roll of foolscap.

The Honourable Montgomery began to scent a design upon his purse-strings.

‘Don’t read it, there’s a good chappie. I’ve come over here to enjoy myself. I don’t want any of that infernal soft sawder. You won’t get a brad out of me, so it’s no use trying.’

‘My very dear friend, have I asked for it?’

‘Not yet, but you will. I thought I’d just give you the straight tip, don’t you know?’

‘You are too kind. Now, listen, I beg.’ Then, for the second time that day, Henry Wodehouse launched out into an enthusiastic forecast of his new scheme, compelling the other’s attention by many a well-directed compliment to his superior intelligence. ‘Now, let me ask you, as a man of the world, how can so grand, so limitless an enterprise as that, possibly fail? It would be preposterous to imagine such a thing.’

Mr Spooner laughed.

‘You’re fairly hit again—a regular walking prospectus. I should have thought you’d had about enough of newspapers to last your time out. Most fellows would have thrown up the sponge long ago.’

‘Never, until the grave closes over me!’ exclaimed Henry fervently. ‘But, to business. This is a list of those who have promised support to the new journal. Pray don’t move. You’ll let me have the great honour of adding your historic name to the rest? Just look at the array. It’s really magnificent.’

If length counted for anything, it certainly was stupendous, with a bishop at the head. Nor were there, probably, more decoy-ducks than occur in most similar documents.

‘All right, you may put me down,’ Mr Spooner consented magnanimously. ‘But mind, no shares.’

‘My word is my bond as to that. By the way,’

continued Henry, stroking his chin, and with a very keen glance at his companion's rather vacuous countenance, 'as you may easily believe, there are certain incidental personal expenses in these cases, which—well, to be plain—leave me a little short of actual ready cash. If you could, without inconvenience, of course, advance me perhaps'—('What shall it be?' he seemed to be inquiring of himself. 'Ten? twenty?')—'let us say, twenty pounds, it would be an act of Christian charity not readily forgotten. Directly this floats,' Henry rustled the leaves of his document, 'payment follows.'

Mr Spooner groaned.

'I thought it was coming. You're a regular leech, though deuced good company, for all that, Wodehouse. Here's a pony for you. I'll take your I.O.U., if you please—not that it's worth much.'

'By all means, my very dear friend. You will not regret this deed, though you outstrip Methusaleh in years. Thomas, pen, ink and paper.' The security was written out and duly signed with a promptitude only to be acquired by frequent practice. A mere formality, of course, but necessary in these suspicious days. 'Once more I thank you.' Henry pocketed the loan his own flesh and blood had meanly refused him. 'Just one more stirrup-cup, at my expense, to ratify the transaction. No? Going to drive out again to Auteuil, after a look in at the club? Well, better luck than ever.' Assuredly that wish was sincere.

As Henry, with one of the Honourable Spooner's choicest cigars between his teeth, strolled calmly back towards the Bourse, the feeling uppermost in his mind was fervent gratitude to the French

authorities for organising autumn race meetings in the suburbs. What a delightful city this would be to sojourn in! Racing, the best part of the year, within a stone's-throw of the capital; a population all agog for gambling on every conceivable occasion; plenty of nice, well-connected young gentlemen, with more money than brains, always ready to part when you knew how to humour them; the absolute certainty of landing a prize through his favourite hobby, if only he could get people to trust him. Henry's always sanguine mental barometer rose several points since the morning. It is even possible that, in his then equable, generous mood, he entertained good resolutions of repaying Mr Spooner his loan—when he settled with Mrs Pybus perhaps, at that delightfully uncompromising period 'later on.' Whether the indebtedness were cancelled or no, it is certain that debt, in a quarter where he considered all fair game, would sit lightly on his conscience. When such trifles began to worry him, it might be presumed Henry Wodehouse was in a bad way indeed. These prickings were to be expected after he had ceased to believe in himself as the regenerator of mankind, 'through the wholesome channels of journalism.'

It was a wearisome, thankless task, this effort to revive the glories of the 'Pilot' under another name. A publisher had once told Henry, in reference to fiction, that one might as well expect to raise the dead as reverse the verdict of failure once pronounced. He began to think that fellow knew what he was talking about. Many a plump fish got upon his hook only to wriggle off again directly the

bugbear figures was touched upon. The promoter's mere assurances that the affair must turn up trumps did not satisfy these timid creatures. Moreover, even the few innocent gudgeons he did contrive to catch insisted on some security before parting with their money. As he was working the concern alone, this was impossible. Floating a company seemed child's-play to the difficulties to be encountered when that company was only Henry Wodehouse in his own proper person, with the weight of his antecedents dragging him down so unmercifully at every step. Surely the word of a gentleman was sufficient guarantee that the undertaking was a genuine one. It showed such a shockingly niggard spirit, this constant craving for, as one idiot put it, 'some guarantee for other than purely visionary profits, Mr Wodehouse.' A little good-faith must be shown in these matters. People could not expect it all to come from his side.

Even at the club, in many respects such a useful passport to his respectability, Henry found few adherents. Members were, indeed, disposed to treat the idea with unbecoming levity, favouring its originator with an amount of ridicule which, but for the compensating offers of refreshment, would have been unpardonable. More particularly did they fasten upon the religious lever Henry used upon all wavering sympathisers, as a peg upon which to hang their indecent jokes. More than once he had been counselled by the younger sparks to start a Continental 'Pink-un' as being more in his line, with a special column devoted to novel drinks, in the concoction of which, in his gayer moments, he stood unrivalled. One ribald youth had even suggested that the journal's

new title should be the 'Inchcape,' as a warning to over-confiding speculators. But that was said covertly, or it might have fared badly with so irreverent a wag.

After a month of incessant, exhausting labour, during which his energies naturally required a good deal of keeping up, Henry was forced to admit that he had not succeeded in persuading the Anglo-French colony, where his operations were now chiefly carried on, that another organ was essential to the welfare of their community. It was doubly sad, because he had surmounted the difficulty of getting permission from those domineering authorities to allow his paper to be once more published in Paris: a concession, to Henry's sanguine temperament, alone worth thousands.

Under these disappointing conditions, it is not astonishing that our friend found cause to modify his view as to the advantages of residence in that lively but expensive capital.

He had started well—perhaps too valiantly—upon Mr Spooner's pony, but had pulled up dead lame now. Even Messieurs Latouche nephews had pressed for a settlement of their account—a truly ungracious act on their part, seeing the many good turns Henry had done their establishment. Already, to suit the convenience of more distinguished travellers, this luckless projector had mounted so near the sky that Mr Fortescue Jones's office was an *entresol* by comparison to his chamber. There was no lift, either, to spare his commendably steady legs when he returned during the small hours. It really looked as if, fortune still frowning on him, he would be driven to that extra-mural quarter where the inevitable needy widow lady with the uncertain income had settled: she, at anyrate, would not scorn his proposals for a contra.

Sad to tell, with that humiliating prospect staring him in the face, Henry gave way to much unseemly complaining. Especially did he single out his daughters and Neil Challoner as the primary causes of his embarrassed position, though, one would have fancied, they at least should have been spared such reproaches. As usual, his accusations, whether imparted to others or privately nursed, were retrospective, taking the injured, plaintive strain now habitual with him. He overwhelmed those who could be induced to listen with details of his own domestic virtues before that unhappy estrangement had occurred to well-nigh break an indulgent husband's heart. What, in reality, were his requirements but the most modest; his tastes of the simplest. Just a comfortable seat by the fireside, with a favourite pipe; plenty of sporting papers ready to hand; perhaps a glass or two of something cheering at recognised intervals; his claims for exemption from hard work duly respected, then he would have been a model of paternal content. Instead, he had been grossly maligned; a few trifling indiscretions magnified into offences of the gravest; an occasional lapse—surely excusable in such a dull hole as Budleigh-Tarleton—from the strictest temperance used against him with a malignity only possible from a village full of croakers. When, at last compelled to assert his position as a husband and father with becoming dignity, he had been accused of much ignoble conduct, altogether impossible in one born of such a county stock as he. Then, after the loss of his lamented Celia—who had been cruel enough to forsake him—and if somewhat strait-laced, was, as women went, yet faithful and docile—matters had taken a worse

turn than ever. Where his girls should have tried by every means in their power to make amends for past neglect, they had (influenced by a lot of offensive meddlers, professedly their friends) adopted an obstinate, penurious policy, which, whilst deeply wounding his feelings, had fairly astounded him, from two such hitherto pliant dispositions. Worst slight of all, the small sum of money which ought only to have passed into a father's keeping, had been tied up so tightly, for their sole use, that he to whom it would have been a perfect godsend, and who could have turned it over again and again to mutual advantage, was debarred from using a penny. Now, after years of positive slavery on behalf of his fellow-men, he found himself in the deplorable strait of having to solicit the trumpery loan of a few pounds—he who, in his day, had dealt in thousands. Such was the melancholy version Henry gave of his past history. Assuredly there could be but one unanimous, sympathetic answer to the touching inquiry if that was a just reward for a life of public-spirited enterprise and self-sacrifice?

At times Henry would pass from this ultra-confidential stage into a state of almost savage moroseness painful to witness—a bear with a sore head was a festive companion by comparison, the members agreed. He would sit for hours drinking, smoking, and railing at fortune with such vehemence that some hinted the once resourceful intellect must be giving way under misfortune, possibly becoming played out, as Mr Jones's Hebrew relation had reported of the latest literary inspiration. Happily his spirits revived at the sight of the dice-box, or the wherewithal to slake that exacting thirst might not have been forthcoming. An adept at billiards, he had

also that game of skill to fall back upon. Few could hold their own with him when he was in form, or baffle the eye or head, which at all hours were so wonderfully cool and accurate.

Weak-minded, chimerical, Henry Wodehouse. If you had only turned your brilliant capabilities to better purpose, what a noble career might not have been open to you. The labour and vexations of starting a dozen abortive schemes, much wear and tear of misdirected energy, the mortification of countless entanglements, all might have been spared. Instead, you have become the disciple of a deplorable morality, a man at war with all the best promptings of humanity, the slave of a degrading vice. Worst sin of all, by every paltry excuse, you have shirked a father's responsibility towards his children, making them suffer by your evil repute, instead of supporting them throughout their many trials.

CHAPTER II.

UNGENEROUS FATE.

THE holiday which the novelist with his young companion were taking, and to which Shirley had by her self-denial so generously contributed, was fast drawing to a close. Soon the two would be back again, the writer to his bread-winning, Neil to enter upon those new experiences he already instinctively dreaded. They were making the most of the few hours left until the train bore them back to the smoke and turmoil of London.

Robert had climbed to a favourite nook, where, undisturbed, sheltered by a projecting rock, he could bid farewell as he might to those scenes so present always to his mind, but of which he could never tire, because of the many hallowed associations which made their memory sacred to him.

He must say good-bye once more to this much-favoured haunt of the fisherman, beside whose waters he and Nevill Challoner have wandered so often of late in peaceful, sympathetic harmony. Not many years ago he sat under this very crest, a deep sorrow fresh upon him, and cried out in his misery that he hoped he might never see the valley again where cruel death had robbed him, in one short month, of so

much love and station. He recalled also how, in his bitter distress, he had bemoaned the fate which let him live, with those others taken from him, wondering whether it were possible for grief to kill. What charms had life, with those gentlest of parents gone? where was happiness to be found on earth, when she—his betrothed darling of a few short weeks—had passed away beyond recall?

But Time's soothing hand had taught him resignation now, pointing hither as the spot where, through this same affliction, many a noble lesson might be learnt.

Robert was therefore glad that the choice had fallen upon this place as the end of their walking tour. For, under the influence of the recollections awakened, he felt better able to lead the mind of his charge aright.

There, down in the dell, sat this boy who had crept into his lonely heart, in whose welfare he was so deeply interested. At that moment Neil was absorbed in his occupation of completing some lines he had written about the district. The elder could not but admire the intensity and earnestness of the young poet. It confirmed the opinion he had formed, when their acquaintance was in its infancy, that Neil possessed the invaluable quality of thoroughness in all he undertook. That his first start was to be made in a direction totally unsuited to his temperament, troubled Robert sorely. He had only to look back upon those years he himself had spent, singularly enough, close to where this lad was going, to be satisfied that here would be another instance of someone misplaced in the world. But how was it to be avoided? It was out of the question that Neil could ever afford to go to college; his resources

pointed to the chances of such honourable distinction there. But when he touched lightly upon the subject, Neil gallantly put the original project of assisting his cousins before any other advantages. This resolve seemed firmly fixed in his mind. The elder respected the determination too highly to attempt to check it.

With all its advantages, college life offered great temptations. He had, in his own uphill struggles, met with many far from creditable specimens to their respective Seats of Learning. Even during their recent holiday, this opinion had been confirmed by the behaviour of some students they had come across. Not that he feared for Neil, because he was so sure that his good qualities would stand by him always ; but he did honestly regret that he was to be placed under the very walls of the London Stock Exchange. It seemed positively wrong to bring this dreamy, poetical Nevill in contact with the din and rush of that worldly quarter. Although Robert by no means professed to be a saint, he knew (as every thinking person must) that endless opportunities are afforded there for indulgence in the vice of gambling—facilities which seem increasing with giant strides. How else is it possible that mere youths, whose capital may be reckoned in shillings, are able to speculate to an extent which would have appalled their grandfathers, sheltering themselves during operations behind some mysterious ‘cover,’ not always infallible. The picture shown daily at Circe’s Crib, where men who have grown grey in the service, dabble so persistently, is sad enough in all conscience. But surely it is the more deplorable when the mania seizes these striplings in their weakness and inexperience.

There was satisfaction in knowing that the firm Neil was about to join was old-established and respectable. Still the fact remained that its dealings were in the objectionable place indicated. Robert had fondly hoped some opening might have presented itself in a branch where money making was less obtrusive. Well, it was no use lamenting, as things were now finally arranged. Colonel Hoskyns, Edward Foster's executor, had interested himself on Neil's behalf, with the result that he was to enter forthwith the counting-house of Messrs Sharp & Argent of Achilles Passage. One thing Robert was firmly decided upon. If he found him unequal to the situation, or his health suffering in consequence, he would enforce the right his position warranted, for he by no means forgot the promise made to the old man that his 'legacy' was in safe keeping. It was far from his wish to stand in the way of Neil's advancement. But he was determined that the bitter lesson he had learnt should not be wasted. He meant to guard this precious trust with all his might, so as to render a faithful account of his stewardship to those dear girls, who watched their cousin's progress with such affectionate solicitude. In his eyes, it would be a gross neglect of all the confidence they had placed in him were he to act otherwise.

Then Robert fell to wondering how things had gone with them whilst Neil and he had been tramping over the peaks of Derbyshire. As a rule, the daily round of duty and relaxation flowed peacefully on at Prospect Cottage, with little to interrupt its harmony. But obviously something weighty had occurred in the household of late. For there was mention in one of Shirley's letters—the much-prized contents of which

were shared between the two—of momentous news from abroad, causing great excitement, as well as pain, to the sisters. The younger had even hinted at the possibility of having to undertake a journey alone to the Continent, a contingency provoking, as may be imagined, much conjecture. Their first suspicions were naturally that Henry Wodehouse was the cause of this decision. But in this instance he was blameless. Shirley's communication was brief, and gave no clue to the mystery.

'Something has occurred, cousin,' she wrote, 'to upset little Nora and myself dreadfully. You must not ask me for particulars, though I may tell you it is nothing which affects our fortunes in the least: you will know by this who is not to blame. I would write all about it, were it not wrong towards somebody we love very dearly. Besides, perhaps you are not quite old enough to understand, so you will wait patiently until we are more free to mention the subject, will you not? Fancy, I may have to run across to France all by myself: I wish it were the dear old Dresden instead. I don't mind saying, I dread the crossing awfully, and my French is abominably bad. However, nothing shall stop me, if I can only persuade my— There, I had nearly let it out, so I will say good-bye, in case I forget myself again.'

With this tantalising intelligence the two had to rest contented.

When it is remembered what Robert's feelings were towards Shirley, it may be guessed how he was affected. It was all very well to talk thus lightly of running over, but he knew what sacrifices this meant before the tender wish could be realised; how the girl he loved would fret if unable to at once act upon her

generous impulse. He could form no idea of the motive for the contemplated journey, unless for some reason she wanted to join the Misses Turnbull, who were investigating Druidical remains at Carnac, according to annual custom. At anyrate, whatever the object of the errand, Robert longed to be by Shirley's side, in case of harm. Perhaps she might have left before Neil and he got back. How desolate Prospect Cottage would look if she, who was the life and soul of its inmates, were absent!

However, he must reconcile himself, sooner or later, to a separation. What if it were thus hastened? Doubtless all was for the best. For, after a great mental struggle, he had decided to leave Hampstead. Immediate supervision of Neil Challoner would soon be unnecessary. He could only watch, praying for his support and guidance in the battle duty dictated to him. Had he still occupied the post of tutor, personal considerations would not have influenced him. But he would be alone again with his work soon, free to seek some other lodging if he chose.

What was the reason for this contemplated rupture of so many pleasant ties? In his nice sense of honour, Robert had persuaded himself that he was not worthy to approach such a girl as Shirley Wodehouse, much less venture to dream of love in connection with one so far above him. He must tear himself away from so fascinating a presence before the temptation to declare himself overmastered him, and—to his other trials—added that of a humiliating rejection, for that must inevitably be the result. He would nerve himself to go at once, that he might spare this dear one pain; himself, a pity which, at her hands, would be little short of torture. Clearly that

was the only course open to any honourable man in his position. Moreover, had he not vowed to try and hold himself aloof from all such selfish distractions as these until he had made his mark? Surely he was not going to give way to such weakness, with the success for which he had pinched and toiled within measureable reach? That were grossest ingratitude for the blessings of health and opportunities vouchsafed.

Already, more than once, he had felt his power checked by these tender influences; his imagination, failing to answer the helm as readily as before, tempted rather to stray into all sorts of fanciful regions, pleasant enough for oneself to indulge in, yet scarcely marketable or remunerative. It was obvious that no further encouragement must be given to so fascinating a digression. Now was the time to make the change. He was resolved to stand firm by his resolve. This was the sentimental view of the situation. As for the practical, he had only to think of his straitened means to feel how he was cut off almost from hope. Let brighter times come, then things might alter. Until that change, application and economy must be his only passwords.

Then, of a sudden, his thoughts veered round. What if Shirley Wodehouse loved him? Was the idea, after all, so preposterous, as he had so often told himself? Once or twice, during those delightful evening conversations, before they had left, notably at the hour of departure, Robert remembered a marked difference in Shirley's demeanour towards him. It was obviously a part of his calling to make a study of those he met in the busy world around, and he was not likely to neglect this opportunity. For if here was a character full of attractiveness to the ordinary student,

how much more must it be so for him, who believed that he had, with that one exception which could never again be reached, found his ideal of womanhood in this brave young songstress. Could it, therefore, possibly be that she returned his passion? Shirley was so natural and true, that it was impossible to suspect her of duplicity, even in an affair where so much licence is proverbially granted. Coquetry was equally foreign to her nature; indeed, he doubted if the sisters knew its meaning, much less how to cultivate so foolish a pastime. He, therefore, who should be so blessed as to win this noble girl's affection, might be quite sure of gaining one who detested those wiles which many of her sex are only too willing to cultivate for man's entanglement. Robert felt sure that, whatever her feelings might be in respect to him, her conduct would continue perfectly open and sincere.

Why, then, had Shirley's hand distinctly trembled as he took it within his own at parting? Was the anxiety for Cousin Neil really so great that her cheek must needs turn pale when she laughingly enjoined him to be very careful of one who was so precious to all of them? Was the mute appeal in her eyes all on the lad's behalf, none for him who would have held ambition, prospects, everything, as naught in exchange for just a certain whisper from those sweet lips? Most of us, Robert imagined, have passed through some such supreme moments as these. But that was only a poor consolation when haunted by these harassing doubts which stole away his peace of mind.

Then there was that unmistakable inclination on Shirley's part to avoid him of late. What did that mean? No matter when he might drop into the

common-room, if she were present, some reason immediately suggested itself for a hasty retreat. The number of times she had found it necessary to improvise shopping excursions, or to consult Miss Pridham at length upon topics of domestic economy, roused even the simple-minded, preoccupied Nora to wonder.

It was only when night set in, and all reasonable excuses were exhausted, that she settled down, and Robert's patience became rewarded. Nor did she then seem altogether at ease. Once, indeed, overcome by emotion, she had, in a most unprofessional manner, fairly broken down during the singing of a ballad, with the further sensational climax of rushing up to her room and refusing all offers of comfort. Nora thought it was the weather, which had certainly been oppressive, but scarcely warranted such a collapse.

It was all very inexplicable, clearly proving how, with all the skill in the world for arranging other people's love affairs in print, a man can be baffled completely over his own.

This painful avoidance of him was the chief source of trouble to Robert. But besides that, there were innumerable little signs of embarrassment—more particularly when, by rare accident, the two were alone together—which increased his bewilderment, and intensified his great longing to know if he were in any way responsible for them.

Following such stirring meditations came the further dread fancy that perhaps, in her consideration for his feelings, Shirley was adopting this strange course in order to warn him that she had given her heart to another.

But surely that was a fear he could afford to dismiss outright. There had not long before been much harmless fun at Shirley's expense over a certain admirer, who, after lessons, had gallantly escorted the instructress across the Heath, through the fog. Robert remembered how they had all laughed over the girl's naïve comments on the adventure. No, her manner proved her to be heart-whole. In her bright, unaffected style, Shirley repeated the assertion that little Nora and she were determined to remain old maids in the future. If Robert knew anything about the ways of young ladies, his studies could not have been altogether fruitless. This one would never have joked on such a serious subject if she favoured anybody in particular. Nor would she probably have boldly stated that men were, as a rule, a selfish set of creatures.

'Yes, it's all arranged, isn't it, Nollekins?' were Shirley's very words. 'Eliza, who has also quite made up her mind to remain single, is already engaged as upper-housemaid. Of course, long before that, Nora will have made a fortune from her writings, and I shall be a distinguished vocalist. But we shall not be a bit uplifted in our prosperity, and always delighted to see old friends. Neil will be a city magnate by that time. and live close by us—we settled all that years ago, didn't we, cousin?'

Robert thought the boy did not seem quite at his ease during this speech, casting anxious looks at Miss Wodehouse, as if to fathom the effect it had produced upon her. He did not then know the secret of Neil's attachment, or he might have been less surprised at the youth's anxiety. The fact is, Shirley's pleasantries cut very deep into Neil's feelings, for the determination to ultimately marry Nora was as strongly pre-

sent with him as in the happy Dresden days, when he had declared his passion with so much youthful ardour beside the river Elbe. Mr Hossack might call men selfish if he chose, but some were faithful through everything, as Nevill Challoner meant to demonstrate. Was it nothing that he had given up the certainty of gaining distinction as a poet to accept service in that horrid city? Everybody knew how impossible it was to manage two vocations satisfactorily. How, then, could he do justice to those brilliant fancies which were always running through his brain if he were destined to sit on an office stool all day, perhaps even run errands? It was simply preposterous; therefore, ambition must be sacrificed. For without doing so, he would never marry little Nora, who was very delicate and would require no end of comforts. Besides, he had to help both girls in the present, as well as save up money for his own ends. Neil was, however, quite reconciled to the programme he had arranged, though no one will deny that it was a heavy load for his young shoulders to bear. It will thus be seen that, after all, he was not such a dreamer, but that he could be worldly-wise sometimes.

Well, Robert sat there trying to explain satisfactorily all the conflicting phases of Shirley's recent conduct towards him, but without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. Soon the lengthening shadows warned him that his minutes in Dovedale were numbered. All his cogitations only left him sadly perplexed. As for any prospect of a return of his love, that was a bliss he dare not contemplate. And yet . . . No, he would be a man, and leave the cottage, sparing himself an inevitable aftermath of self-reproaches, as a judgment on him for his pre-

sumption. It was notorious that any right-minded girl would die sooner than betray her feelings, until another's action left her free to yield up her secret. What right had he to expect any special favour in his case? It was quite part of a novelist's stock-in-trade, to improve upon such complications and cross-purposes in fiction, where affairs of the heart naturally held a prominent place. Robert had himself often led his characters into all sorts of distressing situations, not without success—in fiction. In dealing, however, with this momentous episode as affecting himself and his own happiness, he was clearly the veriest tyro. Unfortunately, also, his modesty placed him on the lowest possible pedestal of personal attractiveness. This was a pity, for a little self-confidence here might have improved matters considerably. Had he only known the truth! But in these important crises of our lives how rarely we do. With an effort Robert shook off his reverie, summoning Neil, who was still gazing meditatively into the stream.

Little was said as the two walked back to the 'Stoat and Weasel' to pay their modest bill and sling on their knapsacks. Both were fully occupied with their own thoughts, tinged with the sweet sorrow of parting from scenes of repose and beauty. Later, as the train hurried them away Londonwards, they fell to talking of all they had seen and done. To Robert, the one blot upon an otherwise delightful outing had been the incident of meeting with those collegians referred to. Especially had it been a source of intense regret to him that circumstances should have brought Neil in contact with them. For they professed to belong to a school of so-called philosophy which he held in great abhorrence—a sect with views

crude, unripe, demoralising. Nor did they neglect a single opportunity of forcing them upon others. In Robert's eyes, their intrusion into that spot was an insult. With all his care, he found it impossible to keep his companion apart from those in whom he recognised only an intolerable egotism hidden under the transparent veil of a feeble satire, at once puerile and aggressive. He, in his manhood, could afford to treat these puny scoffers with the contempt they deserved. But he dreaded lest their arguments should reach Neil's impressionable mind with hurtful consequences. Altogether it was just one of those unhappy experiences he would have given worlds to have avoided. He even blamed himself that he had not hurried Neil away sooner.

There was one especially objectionable item in the code of these foolish students. In their professed enlightenment, they had formed themselves into a ridiculous anti-matrimonial syndicate, which, apart from its vulgarity, was distinctly immoral. Respecting as he did the liberty of free-thought and argument in most things, Robert resented the discussion of so delicate a question in the publicity of an inn. He had further to learn that he was forced to listen passively to a series of diatribes from the lips of these ignorami, who held so few things sacred, and dared to attack this of all other holy institutions. Although, in his reserve, it took much to rouse the novelist, he had at length lost patience, combating the arguments advanced with a quiet, unanswerable dignity and force which surprised Neil, and drove his opponents for shelter behind the feeblest of generalities. Those powerful voices of right and moral persuasion were not to be easily silenced. Although, of course, the

overweening conceit of such as these could never permit them to acknowledge defeat, it was clear, from their subsequent attitude towards him, that Robert's rejoinders had struck home. Perhaps just then he was unusually sensitive upon the subject attacked. Be that as it may, his rejoinders had been crushing, and should have carried conviction with them.

Nor was this the worst these miserable detractors had the indelicacy to intrude upon their fellow-travellers. That attractive target for discourse, religion, did not escape their shafts, rendered dangerous only by the recklessness with which they were shot.

Now Robert was at all times deeply resentful of any interference with what is assuredly a man's most sacred property—the ruling of his own Faith. He held that, whatever opinions were professed, it was no part of another's mission to try and disturb them by vulgar aggressiveness. There were those who, in their bigotry, would tolerate none save the members of their persuasion. Wrapped in an immaculate cloak of exclusiveness, all others must be kept outside the pale of recognition. That was sad, because it showed such a deplorable narrowness of spirit. But when these who neither professed belief themselves, nor recognised the existence of any in others, sought to intrude their sophistries upon delicate ears, pity for their ignorance gave way before a profound contempt.

It was, however, a melancholy fact that here existed a band of godless youths, fresh from an acknowledged centre of education, presumably refinement, who propagated a series of doctrines which would have disgraced the intelligence of a costermonger. Much good had this reading tour done them, truly! Robert,

disturbed alternately by feelings of pain and disgust at their conduct, wondered how it were possible for any, surrounded by such advantages as they must possess, to have become so alienated from all that was cultured and rational. Surely one might have hoped for a happier result from those who were privileged to drink at the very well-springs of learning and true enlightenment. What would not some of Robert's fellow-workers have given for such chances as these enjoyed? There were not a few brave fellows he could name, toiling on in their several restricted grooves to whom a peep into those, to them sealed, libraries might have given a splendid impetus—the *entrée* to whose treasures reawakened the energies of many a discouraged comrade. Here he found all these pearls in the wide ocean of literature cast before such swine!

For Robert, as said, there was no fear for his rock of Faith. The later school of adversity and privation, through which he had passed with distinction, whilst strengthening his manhood, had cemented many good qualities, bringing to the front the firm anchors of self-reliance, above all, self-respect, against which all wrongful doctrines might beat in vain. But with the budding intellect of this young friend of his it might be different. An evil word let drop, some attractive contention taken to heart, and the mischief might be incalculable. There could be no limit to the danger of such associates. Robert, therefore, on that homeward journey, urged Neil to forget altogether that he had ever met these latter-day perverters, with their unbecoming sneers and blasphemies. Rather, he led him on to talk of the healthier aspirations of his future.

'I wonder if I shall like this firm of Sharp & Argent,' was Neil's conjecture, after many interchanges of opinion respecting the Stock Exchange and the probable surprises city life held in store for him. 'I've only seen one of the partners for a short time, you know. He seemed very busy and boisterous.'

Nor was Neil ever likely to forget that morning of his introduction. Let us reproduce his impressions. He had been enjoined to meet Colonel Hoskyns, outside the office in Achilles Passage, at noon. Long before that, however, in his nervous anxiety not to be late for the appointment, he found himself, got up in his Sunday best, in the very thick of the hurry and bustle of Throgmorton Street on a 'pay-day.' Neil had never seen such a noisy place. He squeezed himself up a court to watch the throng of hatless young men, mostly laden with bags or papers, rushing past him. The street itself was blocked with groups of people, apparently concluding bargains, although their language was quite unique. Whatever they dealt in must have required adjusting with great nicety, for the whole talk was of fractions of money, the integers, for some reason, not entering into their transactions at all. That was very singular; so was the circumstance that those clerks ran about without any hats on. Neil could only suppose that it was the result of preoccupation, or extreme urgency in their affairs. He was obliged to console himself with the reflection that in a few weeks he would, no doubt, be initiated into the mysteries of this strange locality. Then, he was simply dazed with what he saw. To make matters worse, there came from behind him a subdued roar of human voices, to be compared to nothing he had ever heard, unless it were the din of the betting-

ring, as interpreted by the supers in an Adelphi melodrama to which his guardian had once treated him. When, at five minutes to noon, Neil made his way with difficulty round to that narrow Passage, where he was subsequently condemned to pass so many uncongenial hours, he felt quite dizzy with all the novel sights. Although only as some unearthly buzzing, that confusing noise was still audible through the black shutter which barred the end of the alley, and was grim-looking enough to have been one of the portals of Hades. The prospect was certainly not inviting, when he considered the probability of having to spend the best part of his days in so gloomy a place. Had he not caught sight of the colonel's erect figure, it is possible Neil might have then and there lost courage, and fled back to Hampstead, where he would probably never have had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Messrs Sharp & Argent. But it was otherwise willed.

'Glad to find you so punctual, my lad. Good omen for the future. Rum place the city, isn't it?' was Colonel Hoskyn's greeting. 'You've turned out for parade, I see,' he continued, running a critical eye over Neil's smart attire and finely-knit frame. 'Sorry I've not got to enrol you in a different regiment to this. Can't be helped, though; must earn our living somehow. There's the old Exchange clock playing "God save the Queen." Couldn't do better than march up to that time, could we? Come along.'

This was hearty, at anyrate. It put new pluck into Master Neil.

Messrs Sharp & Argent's offices also seemed to have caught the fever raging in its near neighbourhood that morning, for the excitement within them was

prodigious. To begin with, Neil was nearly knocked over by some over-zealous person with a betting-book, who was appropriately named a 'runner': to have been capsized thus ignominiously at the outset of his career would indeed have been ominous.

Once safely inside, the two were invited to be seated whilst Mr Sharp was 'called' from the House. What struck the boy most during that period of waiting was the number of small rooms these brokers had partitioned off for their use. It seemed to him a great waste of space, where three at most would have been ample. When later the colonel and he recruited themselves with oyster-patties at Birch's, the reason was explained to him. It seemed that the arrangement was necessary to meet the wishes of many susceptible clients, who were unaccountably shy in their dealings before others. When, it is added, that all the little dens were furnished with an instrument which kept up an irritating clicking, it will readily be understood how distracting were the conditions of Neil's presentation to his future employer. Besides, there were several Jew-looking gentlemen, smoking cigars, and either scanning a large sheet of quotations or hungrily watching the strips of tape as they rolled out of the machine on to the floor. As in the street, so here all the talk was of money, with the same sparing use of numerals. (What, for example, could 'Rios, five-eighths down; A. B. C.'s, sixteenth up,' possibly mean?) Such eccentric processes of reckoning were quite incomprehensible.

But Neil's cogitations were disturbed by the rapid entrance of a very smart individual. This, thought he, must be Sharp; but it was not.

'How do, colonel? Awfully sorry to have kept

you. Fact is, Sharp can't get across just now—too busy—so sent me. Got some money to invest? Things all anyhow to-day. Recommend you to wait a bit. By-the-bye, met Cobb on the stairs. Sold him those Majorcas, three premium—book that, Mr Stone, will you? A doocid good price too. Now, colonel, what can I do for you?’

All this was said—or rather shouted—in a breath. Colonel Hoskyns politely indicated his companion with a wave of his hand. Mr Argent favoured Neil with one of the keenest glances he had ever encountered; but he did not wince under the ordeal.

‘Ah, yes, I remember. Hope you're well, young man?’ Neil fancied that somehow his scrutiniser looked a little disappointed, if not vexed. In reality he was saying to himself, ‘Blow the ancient warrior, coming here on a settling day, with markets all over the place as well. Looks a likely enough lad, though,’ with another penetrating glance at Neil; ‘suppose we must take him. Colonel's people been good clients in their day.’ Aloud, this restless person said, ‘Sharp manages all this sort of thing. But haven't a doubt it'll be all serene. He'll write you. Excuse a minute.’ Then he darted across to a telephone, and exchanged some animated though totally unintelligible remarks with a customer at the other end, breaking off abruptly with a friendly ‘Good-bye.’ ‘How's the country looking down your way,’ he resumed; ‘birds pretty plentiful? Heaps at my place. Look us up when you can. Well, ta-ta, colonel. Sorry can't stop. Awfully busy. Sharp'll write or wire you.’

He was gone as quickly as he had come, leaving his visitors with a very confused idea of what had really happened.

'Do you think they will engage me, sir?' Neil inquired nervously, as they turned their steps westward.

'Not a doubt of it; make your mind quite easy on that score. Wish we could have seen Sharp, though. Don't care much for that other blustering chap.'

'Are all stockbrokers like that, I wonder?' pursued Neil. 'They seem a very excitable race. Are they always talking about money?'

'Perhaps there are some sober ones amongst them,' Colonel Hoskyns answered, with a laugh, 'though I confess they want looking for. They certainly are a queer lot, and a trifle vulgar. Still, open-handed, so we must forgive them a good deal. As for money—well I'm afraid that is what they do chiefly talk about. It's their business, you see; they live in an atmosphere of it.'

Neil was silent, and not a little miserable. His reception had been so entirely different to expectation. Hearing that the firm was old-established and respectable, he had chosen to arrange quite a romantic programme of the probable morning's proceedings.

In accordance with this, the colonel and he were to have been received by two old gentlemen in white stocks, both the pink of politeness. They would have led, by degrees, delicately up to the subject of Neil's engagement in their counting-house, after examining him kindly through gold-rimmed spectacles. Without doubt, they would then have conferred together in private, and, he hoped, returned quite satisfied with their interview. After which, as if to clinch the transaction, they would have offered their tortoise-shell snuff-boxes to Colonel Hoskyns—with perhaps a well-turned pleasantry why the like compliment was not accorded the younger—shaken hands, and named an early date for his appearance. Neil, passing down

a broad oak staircase into some picturesque nook in, say, Austinfriars, would have felt fairly reconciled to his fate.

The fact is, he had elected to go back about a century in the manners and customs of the city, with a suspicion of having taken his cue from sundry pictures in the 'Quiver' he subscribed to regularly.

Instead of being the central figure in this peaceful scene, Neil had been rudely hurried into its modern equivalent, forgetting that Sharp & Argent Juniors were not likely to perpetuate Sharp & Argent Seniors' business in quite the same fashion. Thus, at one blow, the belief in those refined surroundings, which he fondly imagined might have mitigated the severity of his enslavement, was shattered. No wonder he felt depressed, or that his companion found it necessary to rouse him with many an inspiriting anecdote of past campaigns and dead and gone companions-in-arms. Only by the time they reached the Oriental was Neil restored to his usual equanimity.

'Don't you worry,' were the colonel's parting words. 'I wonder if the Queen's shilling burns a hole in people's pockets?'

Neil did not quite understand.

'Well, try a warmer lining,' as he slipped something into the boy's hand—but it was not a shilling.

The poet coloured deeply.

'It is very kind of you, sir, but—' he stammered, and nearly broke down.

'You don't like to rob me of my hard-earned pension, you'd say? I'll forgive you. Good-bye. I'll write the moment I hear from Sharp & Company. My remembrances to the fair cousins, whose handwriting is so familiar to me, though I've never seen them.'

'A nice lad that,' mused Colonel Hoskyns, as he watched Neil pass through those gates which must surely be near relatives to like obstructions further northward. 'A proud, honourable lad, with gentle blood in his veins, unless I'm much mistaken. As sensitive, too, as a mimosa. They'll have to be careful with him. Hear he writes verses, with promise in them. That sort of thing won't keep the wolf from the door. It goes against the grain, somehow, to plant a boy like that out with such specimens. Can't be helped though, I'm afraid. Ned Foster always said it would come to it sooner or later, though he staved matters off as long as he could. Wonder how many times he's hobbled up these steps, or sworn at the steward about his curry. Dear, eccentric old Ned! His heart was in the right place, for all his oddities: there goes one proof of it.'

Fate having thus inexorably fixed Neil Challoner's lines for the present, he like a sensible fellow prepared to accept his position with becoming grace, thereby shaming his mentor, Robert frankly conceded, in respect of his own weakness in a certain direction. But he would waver no longer. With this example before him, now was the time to prove of what stuff he was made. The very next day he would seek another dwelling. That evening he would take his leave of her, in loving whom there was so great danger. Surely he would be permitted the solace of one last reverent look, the delight of a few treasured words, on which to linger in the blank days before him? But he must say good-bye! What a chapter of misery this seemed in the book in which his own life's history was so sternly written—of a truth, there was very little fiction in those pages.

Alas, she was gone ; Robert felt sure of it as Neil and he hurried up the familiar pathway. Evening was fast closing in ; the parlour showed no signs of light ; Miss Nora must also be absent. The first sound of their footsteps brought the cheery Polly Pridham to the door, brimful of welcome.

‘Liza and me was just beginning to feel a bit fidgety. I do dread them trains so at excursion times. Come, sit ye down, both of you, and tell us all the news. I’m thinking you must be about famished. So bustle up with that pie, ’Liza, there’s a dear. Gracious, but I do believe as you’ve growed, Master Nevill.’

‘The young ladies—where are they? It is unusual to find them both out at this hour,’ Robert at length found occasion to inquire.

Miss Pridham held up her hands with quite a volume of meaning in the action. There was much mystery also in the shake of her head.

‘Nothing has gone as usual of late, Mr Robert ; everything’s been topsy-turvy like, ever since Miss Shirley got that upsetting letter. Somehow those foreign ones never do seem to bring any good here. It was this way.’ The landlady seated herself, smoothing out her apron. ‘I was just making myself a bit tidy, before going into the village to pay the bills, one Friday afternoon—though what with those blessed stores, and the heaps of things sent in from the Sicklemores, there’s precious few of ’em now to settle—when who should come bouncing into the kitchen but our youngest missy, quite out of breath with excitement. “Miss Pridham,” cries she, “have you got any money?” (Did anybody ever hear the likes of such a thing?) “Because I must have a large sum

as soon as possible." You may take it for granted I was fair took aback. "My dear," I answers, "I haven't had more than five pounds in the house in a lump since Mr Foster left me that trifle, and right handy it came in, and bless his honest heart for thinking of his old Nurse Pridham." It was before I had any help about the cottage, except the charwoman once a week—'

'Yes, yes, Miss Pridham, we remember that assistance,' Robert broke in, for the good lady had her garrulous stop pulled fully out that evening. 'What we want to hear about is why Miss Wodehouse required the money.'

'To be sure, that's just what I'm coming to presently, if you don't fluster me, though it's true enough I never did quite find out what it was for, except to help some old friend, as, for the matter o' that, she always is doing, try all she may to hide it. The queerest part of the business is her going out o' nights regularly, with my Eliza along with her, and not coming back till past all respectable folk's bedtime. With anybody else it would have meant a week's notice, but—well, there now—I couldn't bring myself to blow up that darling, though I'm afraid 'Liza did catch it more than once, for mysterious wasn't the name for their behaviour; and carrying a tea-tray when rheumatics is flying about you do try the temper sadly. As for Miss Shirley, she'd only to show her pretty face in the kitchen, and I was got round in a jiffy. If she'd been doing anything underhand, such as meeting her young man on the sly, as the best of 'em will do sometimes, she could never have looked so happy and innocent. That was how I settled it with my conscience though, I do say, being orphans, and the Sicklemore.

ladies away, the responsibility wasn't small. However, it seems there's no need to go out surreptitious any more. Yesterday the two was sitting quite cosy before seven o'clock struck, which I was thankful for, as I'm that nervous of thieves that life's next door to a burthen to me after nightfall, and the Heath that lonely, let folks say what they will.'

Neil, pushing away his plate, looked up with a smile.

'They've disappeared to-night, at anyrate. Do you know where they've gone?'

'A long way, both of them, Master Neil, but not together.' (Robert's heart sank.) 'They were that sorry not to be at home to receive you. Miss Nora left all of a hurry for London, about some fairy story she's written, and, as you know she sits mostly with her bonnet on, it didn't take her long to swallow a cup of tea and be off. Miss Shirley, she's gone quite a longish step.'

Robert sighed audibly.

'Well, we must be thankful she has so fine a night for crossing.'

'That's just what I told her, for she will take the short cut under Parliament Hill, which isn't safe for any unprotected girl, as I've said over and over again, with all those tramps about. But she only laughs, and says nobody'll harm a hard-working singing-mistress.' ('Parliament Hill!' That, thought Robert, was a curious route for the Continent). 'Miss Nora was to pick her sister up. They promised to be home by ten, not before, because there was to be songs. I haven't a doubt they'll find a couple of beaux to escort them.'

Any feeling of jealousy this prophecy might have roused in Robert's breast gave way before the intense relief at finding that Shirley was still in England.

'Tell me, Miss Pridham,' he inquired eagerly, 'was there not some talk of Miss Shirley going abroad?'

'There was indeed—a deal of it. To a place I'd never heard of. But everything fell through, so she wrote instead. It's my firm belief the money was wanted to take her over, but she sent some out, though where she got it from's a mystery. Not being up to the ways of young people nowadays, I can't even hazard a guess.'

Robert walked out presently into the cool night air to think. She was here, then, still. In a short hour she would again be near him. He would want all his fortitude when he told her that he had decided to leave, but he convinced himself it was the only course open to him.

Were it only for a few minutes, he would see her that night; nobody on earth should rob him of that great joy. He must store up every look, every word, for it might be long before they met again. Of course their paths would lie wide apart in the future, although, mercifully, Neil was within touch as a link to soften the separation.

Yes, he would indeed feel the wrench. These unselfish, united girls, who were always so brave and patient, had moved Robert to a warm regard of their characters, apart from any mere personal feelings. Just when repeated disappointments seemed combining to break his spirit, they had stepped like angels in his way, rousing his flagging manhood, putting new energy into a well-nigh spent ambition. Nora and Shirley Wodehouse had unconsciously acted as God's instruments; the incalculable blessing of their friendship had shed many a bright ray over his life. Was it wonderful that he had learnt to admire and

respect them above the rest? Surely those who commanded affection from all, must be doubly dear to one who had reason to feel their direct influence for his perpetual strengthening?

After a while, he who thought that love could never again come near him had felt once more its gentle power stealing over his soul. Sweet was the draught, bitter the reflection of its consequences. Of the torture of tearing such love from his heart let us not speak. It was a cruel necessity, but it was right. In that knowledge the man found abiding support.

Robert, having thus fully made up his mind, returned to the cottage. On second thoughts, he would not tell Shirley then that he must go. Just for this once he meant to surrender himself to the bliss of her presence. To-morrow would be time enough—to-morrow, when holidays were over, and work for both began in earnest. He would put off the evil news until to-morrow—that day which never comes.

Lights were in the parlour now. Merry voices sounded through the open door. Was it not worth having endured this short parting, to feel the joy of return—with it the clasp once more of that dear hand, another glimpse into those honest eyes?

CHAPTER III.

ROUSSOFF.

IT was with real delight that Mary Stapleton, after sound, refreshing sleep, awoke to her new surroundings on the first morning of her visit. Instead of the cramped apartment in the Rue Hébert, its only view the other side of that dingy thoroughfare, here was a fine airy chamber, into which soft breezes, laden with the delicious perfume of the sea, came to greet her. Sure enough, not far off was direct evidence of its presence. For from the arched window Mary beheld a splendid expanse of dancing water, across whose surface sun and clouds at that moment combined to play most fantastic tricks.

What a cheering sight for this overwrought woman, who had of late risen day after day to meet a full measure of privation and dread. Here must surely rest be found, the repose she so longed for, which should brace her nerves, enabling her to finish outright what—because of the release it promised—had woven itself into her very being. There lay the pages, stirred by the breath of the ocean, as if to remind their translator of the obligation she was under towards them. Close by was the row of books (Shirley's keepsake amongst the number) which, despite fatigue, she had been mindful to unpack overnight.

Well, it was worth having endured much if no more than a brief spell of ease were to be the reward. Happily, with the strength to suffer bravely, Mary possessed the power to quickly throw off her cares. That morning she felt happier than she had done for many a day. The *charcutière*, who only knew her teacher's face under its habitual cloud of weariness, gladly welcomed the smile with which she was greeted when she bustled across from the inn to see how her visitor had fared during the night. Already at that hour this energetic female was eager to lead Mary forth to form acquaintance with the remarkable attractions of Roussoff.

'Ah, you hear se bell, and are rose as se English, early. What a pretty picture it is you make there. Roussoff is better than Paris in August, I sink. And you?'

Madame Joubert looked up admiringly at her instructress, who leant out, smiling and nodding, from the old stone framework in which her head was set.

'Yes, it is better than Paris, madame; a great deal pleasanter altogether. I shall be with you directly.'

'I wait serefore. Jean, lazy fellow, he zleep still. It is quite wicked this ravishing morning.'

Mary knelt and thanked her Maker for all the blessings vouchsafed to her. She asked that He would guide her steps, subduing those unruly thoughts which so often overcame her better self; imploring Him to grant her a calmer spirit, that she might bear her lot with becoming submission. She prayed also that the greatest weight of all might be lifted from her soul in His good time. Then she hurried down to join her lively hostess.

But Madame Joubert had mysteriously disappeared.

Mary took the opportunity to steal a march upon her cicerone.

'This must be the High Street of Roussoff,' she decided. 'Well, of all the queer, angular places? And there is my room. How peculiar I must have looked calling out to the little woman from my attic.'

There was a delightful old-world appearance about the house, with its sloping moss-covered roof, stained and crusted by the hand of time, with tufts of weed sticking out here and there as ornament. But it did not seem so old or grey as the window behind which Mary had slept, and which looked as if, once slipping, its mass of heavy stonework must drag the roof down along with it. Nor could it be so old as the crumbling doorway, with its wine-shop on one side and tobacconist's on the other. There were white patches about this house, as on many more, where modern fingers had been called in to the rescue—one might regret the decay, but certainly the picturesqueness of the street was increased by the embellishment. Under the window-sill, in chipped, curly letters, was the date, 1582, the accuracy of which only the most sceptical could doubt. They would be difficult to please, also, did they fail to admire the elegant scroll-work in which the stone was fashioned, or the latticed panes through which just then several heads were peeping in wonderment at a lady who found their lodgings worth such enraptured attention. To further stamp the period, atop of all, was perched the squat, cushioned crown of Scotland, guarded by two grotesque gargoyles.

There had evidently been no fixed method when constructing this High Street, for the houses were of many sizes, besides jutting out at all sorts of unusual angles. Some were furnished with courtyards,

making fine playgrounds for the toddling children, who, to the credit of the Roussovites, were extremely plentiful. Into the centre of this main thoroughfare, quite a fringe of weeds upon its ruined walls, one arched window ignominiously filled in with brick, projected the corner of what must formerly have been a lovely chapel. This was the one raised by another hapless Mary—perchance more unfortunate than even she who now gazed upon it—to mark the spot where, a tiny queen of six years, she first set a dainty foot on the shores of her ‘belle France,’ for betrothal to the Dauphin. (‘Poor little mite,’ sympathised her namesake, ‘could she then have foreseen what Fate had in store for her, how much better it would have been had she remained in that land she learnt to love so well.’) This historical fact was, for the benefit of travellers, recorded in black and white upon a board, which, with sundry aggressive posters, disfigured the southern doorway. As the queen whose landing it commemorated, that chapel had passed through many vicissitudes. Only of late, indeed, had individuals and municipalities ceased to wrangle over its remains. Finally, a Scotch marquis gallantly saved the dilapidated walls from irreverent clutches. So much could be learnt from the guide books, when they volunteered any information, though they were singularly reticent about that corner of Finistère. Afterwards, Mary found out a great deal for herself, of which we may hear something later.

Whilst her guest was taking a rapid survey of this interesting relic, Madame Joubert came hurrying along, pleasure and satisfaction written upon her brown, comical face. She carried her bathing-dress under her arm.

'I talk with Monsieur Gosselin,' she cried, saluting her friend on both cheeks in the heartiest English style. 'Ah, but he is a great man. What you sink? He once make se new vig of Alexandre Dumas, when he stay here, not long before he die. It is se truth. I hope you believe? And you zleep well? Sat is good. Very soon we have colour on sose pale cheeks.'

The loquacious little woman, rattling on with her ever-ready tongue with much inconsequence, pointed out to Mary, in rapid succession, the chemist's, the pastrycook's, and, up an alley, the Grande Poste, which was quite the smallest office imaginable. When they got to the corner, madame paused and swept her white umbrella, with the green lining, round as a showman might. 'Now make yourself retty.' (No doubt she was going to introduce something very startling.) 'Is it not splendid, magnificent?' as she indicated sundry objects of interest in the square of Roussoff.

Without indulging in raptures, it certainly was very pretty and original. First there was the church in the middle, a fine fifteenth-century edifice, with a very curious steeple, about the precise architecture of which much difference of opinion prevailed. Some contended that it was Florentine; others, Spanish or Moorish. Probably it was a mixture of all three, though most people agreed that the architect was a Breton. Whatever its style, it was very light and elegant; not so graceful, madame declared, as the one at Saint-Pol-de-Léon, which was (of course) ravishing, nevertheless a great ornament to Roussoff. In fact she went so far as to say that without it the place would lose half its charm, especially when viewed from a distance—a

decision which Mary afterwards learnt to confirm. In the churchyard were two ancient charnel houses, even then filled with bones, if madame's information were correct, though her friend declined an invitation to investigate. From each of their roofs projected two of the grimmest, therefore most appropriate, gargoyles Mary had yet seen, and there were certainly enough to choose from. No doubt to identify the church more completely with the little port, where its seafaring folk came to worship, under the southern window was the rude effigy of a galley fully manned. On its western side was a weather-beaten sundial, bearing the wise admonition, '*Craignez la dernière.*' Round the church, tall and stately, were many rustling trees. The chief hotel, which gave such distinction to Roussoff—tone also, through its bell, if madame's compliment to its capabilities were deserved—stood conspicuously on the right, with four tubs of evergreens and a couple of garden-seats at the entrance, over which hung quite a respectable lamp. Nor had the landlord been bashful when labelling his premises. For the name was very prominent upon its chocolate coloured front.

'Listen! I tell you so,' Madame Joubert cried triumphantly. 'Sat is for little breakfast.'

The church clock had just struck the hour, in deep, funereal tones, lingering about the perforated steeple until it quite trembled under the vibrations, as the last booming sound slowly died away. Scarcely was that bell silent, when its noisy little neighbour set its clapper going, jerking out an urgent summons to the meal, with one sharp reminder at the finish that all was ready. The contrast between those two bells was very striking. The appropriate solemnity of the one, as it chronicled each passing hour; the other, always ob-

trusive and frivolous. The Frenchwoman evidently preferred the livelier of the two, for she continued,—

‘After my deep’—she meant dip—‘I have hunger. And you?’

What, madame had actually been bathing already! Her energy was indeed remarkable. Mary had not noticed the signs of recent immersion her friend presented, the wisps of hair peeping from under her hat, or the oiled silk cap, with the still damp costume.

‘Oh, madame,’ she exclaimed, laughing. ‘You don’t really wear that abominable thing in the water? It is not bathing like sensible English people in the least.’

‘No?’ inquired the lady, in surprise. ‘But it keeps the top of the head so nice and dry.’

Mary was much tickled.

‘You dear, ob-tinate creature! Don’t tell me you have been bobbing about without wetting your head. How do you expect your bath to do you good without ducking properly? You must let me be your dipper to-morrow, unless you want to quarrel.’

‘What you call that ducking? I do not comprehend.’

Mary explained, when the other, of course, consented gleefully to be taught how to bathe in the English manner.

First breakfast at the Bains was served in a small room opposite the kitchen, in full view of all the culinary arrangements. Just a call across the yard and willing Célestine or Marguérite brought you a satisfying bowl of chocolate. Then you had only to cut into one of the quoit-like loaves, and help yourself to some choice Brittany butter, to have a meal fit for an epicure. As for the mercurial Amélie, the ozone had sharpened both appetite and spirits. As she

rattled on, her mouth full, emphasising her remarks with the point of a fortunately blunt knife, Mary was astonished at her inexhaustible vivacity. Could this really be the same woman who protested she at times suffered untold misery from that popular French malady the spleen? It seemed difficult to believe. Even when madame's breath failed her through much talking, she gave out, with a sigh, such disjointed utterances as '*Ah, la la!*' or that other funny little expression, '*O dam!*' which sounds so much like something naughty, but is not.

There was plenty of life in and about the hotel although the day was yet young. The French are not the quietest nation in the world when on their travels, or at home for that matter. So—what with the clatter of sabots; many shrill voices, from the upper storeys, calling to friends below; the banging of doors (in which accomplishment our lively neighbours have few equals); the arrival of the omnibus, which met all trains so assiduously; a spirited altercation between the cook and an old Bretonne, who had brought in a tempting basket of carrots from an outlying garden; the return of the early bathers, with their stories of prowess—Mary felt thankful that she was bedded out where such disturbing influences did not reach her; where the chief sound was one of which she could never tire—the murmur of the waves, as they flowed in upon, or retreated from, the shore. Altogether there was a delightfully open-house, free-and-easy appearance about the Bains which was quite refreshing.

Of course no such establishment could be complete without its *terrasse*, an attraction all wide-awake proprietors know how to turn to the best account in their advertisements. Here, it was a sort of leads, forming

a roof to the stables, scullery, and Monsieur Phélipot's office. The conventional slender-legged chairs and tables were placed ready for those customers who preferred their coffee and *chasses* in the open. Or visitors might lean upon the railing, as Mary presently did, and study the ever-changing surface of the sea. How at low tide it shrank timidly away, to expose countless islets left high and dry upon the great stretch of sand and golden weed. Or, urged by wind and tide, it came on apace, creeping up the sides of those treacherous reefs until their tops were hidden beneath its azure, foam-flecked bosom. At that moment all was still. '*La mer est morte,*' murmured Madame Joubert, upon whom the tranquil scene had a mollifying effect. One might almost have walked across to the sad island of Batz, which, flat and barren, lay stretched out in front. There was no verdure to enliven its grey and stony outline; only the lighthouse and church keeping watch over the low-built, deserted houses. For the fisher-folk were away at their precarious callings, their wives and daughters busy elsewhere, accepting cheerfully the full measure of drudgery falling to woman's lot in those parts. It was well, therefore, that they were sturdy above the rest. Mary could see many of the natives, in the distance, trudging along with baskets upon their shoulders, or poking about in the pools and crevices for treasures the waters laid bare, which would be to them their daily bread.

This island, in its loneliness and sterility, formed a dismal contrast to Roussoff, now in the pride of its summer life and bustle—a contrast even more apparent down by the quay, along which jolted a procession of carts, laden with the produce of the fields. When

these had been safely stowed on board the craft, whose gaping holds seemed only too anxious to swallow their freights, they would be promptly carried off to Cardiff, or elsewhere, to find a ready market. It was not easy to exhaust the resources of that bounteous soil, which, beside these cargoes of potatoes, was ready to yield abundant supplies of carrots, onions, artichokes, cauliflowers, or asparagus, for man's consumption. Will it be credited that one of the sights of the place was a gigantic fig-tree nearly two centuries old (propped up by thirty-eight stone pillars), whose gnarled limbs wound about its aged trunk like serpents? But all this weight of years—all the blasts of the wind which must have swept over it—had not been able to sap the productiveness of that grand tree, which still flourished in the neglected monastery garden. For season after season it put forth its luscious fruit to prove the generosity of the earth, and kindness of the air, in this favoured corner of Brittany.

Mary had stipulated that she was to have the best hours of the morning to herself, because she had work to do which could not be neglected. Whilst at Roussoff she intended to combine business with pleasure with the fixed determination of perfecting her book so as to make it impossible for the publishers to refuse it. Madame Joubert had tried her utmost to upset this decision, but to no purpose. Every turn of thought, each effort of rendering, was to be reconsidered. Wet or fine, so many hours a day for work, and work only: that was Mary's ultimatum. Being a young lady of spirit, the *charcutière* had to retire discomfited, her opinion as to the firmness of the English character much increased. When it is considered what a stake lay behind the result—the chance of shaking off the

yoke of dependence, of seeing once more those she loved in England, above all, of ridding herself of that blight upon her life—that ever-present, hideous phantom—it will be conceded that the effort was worth no mean sacrifice. Money thus earned was to bring the law within her reach—a just and kindly law, which should sever this cruel knot, free a harassed woman from a drunken, dissolute husband. Yes, it was angel's work this, be the theme she expounded what it might. Mary would rack her brains, wear her fingers to the bone, for the sake of so comfortable a release. She felt certain that these delightful surroundings would induce inspiration. So she fetched her pages, and hurried from temptation, in the person of Madame Joubert.

'Don't be frightened if I am not back till sunset,' she called. 'I may get so absorbed, you know, that time counts for nothing. Forgive me for playing the truant so soon. My apologies, also, to monsieur.'

The *charcutière* wondered how any person in their senses could begin a holiday with this singular disregard for meals, or before Roussoff had been thoroughly explored under her guidance. However, it was evidently the English custom, and therefore correct.

Now, where should Mary go? There was such a liberal choice of roads. Whichever she chose must lead again to the blue sea, for she wanted it to talk to her as it always did, with its sweet, soothing voice. That morning she meant to make it a useful counsellor as well; to find not alone delight in its matchless colours and murmurings, but to use its glories for her benefit. Often, in Paris, she had longed for another sight of those waters which filled her with such awe, and never failed to calm her thoughts. This reverence for Nature's boundless marvel had existed

ever since she was a child, when, in her island home, she would sit so long watching the heaving mass, as it rose and fell under her windows, that her very eyes seemed to catch a suspicion of its hues. Many were the puzzling questions put as to why it was never still? or how, all at once, it stopped short just as it seemed about to drown them all? Except during her crossing to France—when she must certainly acknowledge it did not wear its friendliest aspect—Mary had lost sight of her love for years. What was the river beside which she had spent a miserable girlhood compared with this other glorious expanse? It was only in summer that its fondest admirers could call that attractive. In winter it was ugly, swollen, and murky. It would be an injustice to class its beauties with this superb rival, unapproachable in volume and mystery.

And now it was waiting for her again on the other side of that patch of grass, which made so healthy a promenade for the Roussovites. There was a wall to prevent any unruly incursion, in the corner a wooden hut, presumably as shelter for the little ones if a storm came on. The green was overlooked by the Café de la Marine, which also boasted a *terrasse*, and whose proprietor kept a store downstairs for the sale of most necessaries, from candles to coffee. Hard by was the jetty, whence at high-water the boats plied across to the island of Batz. So much Mary took in at a glance. But she must find some quieter workroom than this. Nor had she to go far for it.

A succession of original views met her gaze as she wandered on. First there was a stretch of sloping shingle, which made a capital drying-ground for the washerwomen. On the rough pathway above, were

heaped several loads of seaweed—the men were busy collecting more—to be mixed with the generous soil, and increase its richness. Close to this path, on the left, was the cemetery ; the tops of many slender crucifixes showing amidst the shrubs could mark no other spot. Standing out boldly, near the point where the wild rocks shut in this miniature bay, stood a substantial house, built, no doubt, by some enthusiastic admirer of Roussoff who liked to be as near the breakers as convenient. Scrambling over the boulders, Mary suddenly found herself at the bathing-place Madame Joubert had praised so lavishly. Nor had she overdrawn her description.

It was a sandy cove, with a row of rough dressing-boxes. As these were fixtures, the bathers must have enjoyed an extra run for their money down the slope to the water's edge ; nor was there the customary plank to save their feet during the trip. Roussoff was, as yet, above such luxuries. Visitors might as well have asked for the tub of warm water or comforting glass of Malaga after their ablutions.

It being close-time, this nook had then a very deserted appearance, which, to Mary, added greatly to its charm. With the exception of the *baigneuse*, who was taking breakfast inside one of her boxes, there was no living soul within sight. This was strange, but an additional attraction to the student. For of all places it was the one she, desirous of quiet, would have chosen. The chief feature of Lonely Creek—as she mentally christened it—was a huge grey rock, whose jagged edges stood out grand and clear against the summer sky. This mass was perched upon a grassy hillock, on which many smaller rocks were dotted, the whole forming a natural screen from the

westerly winds. The Roch-Kroum was the name of this odd-looking block. It squatted there like an uncouth petrified toad. The weather-beaten sentry had its face turned towards that desolate island, which was not a cheerful outlook in its treeless, arid melancholy.

‘No wonder the old fellow looks so solemn,’ thought Mary, as she passed over for a nearer inspection of the curiosity. ‘But I am sure he will be a friend to me, with his broad back to keep off the sun and wind. It will be odd if we do not spend many profitable hours together.’

Roussoff must be already putting strength into the governess; for she was soon seated upon a ledge on the other side of Roch-Kroum, enjoying the balmy breeze, which came, they said, charged with the warm breath of the Mexican Gulf-Stream. Wherever it blew from, it was soft and pure, bringing comfort and vigour to, at anyrate, one human being who needed it.

From her post Mary had an extensive panorama. Of the many charming bits, perhaps the prettiest was the peep inland across those fields and gardens which raised such prolific crops, and were divided neatly by dwarf stone walls, which gave them the appearance of well-to-do allotments. Not an inch of space was wasted; indeed, they flourished in almost perilous proximity to the shore. There were plenty of farms scattered about; nearly every plot of land had its toiler bent double with uprooting or digging. To the left lay picturesque Roussoff, with its old-world roofs, patches of foliage, and, towering above all, that remarkable church steeple (with its attendant minaret), which might have graced a city, and so often misled the traveller as to the little port’s real dimensions.

As Mary looked upon that generous land, she fancied that if sin and villainy left any place on earth free from its polluting touch, it must be here. At least, where all was so still and peaceful, a rare chance was offered to forget. Here, too, assuredly, must the hand of the persecutor be stayed.

Mary crept round old Roch-Kroum to make a complete inspection. She tried to picture to herself some of the scenes that oddly-named hump must have passed through, to scar and riddle its hardy surface thus. What breakers must not have lashed its face! what tempests have howled about it! Yet there it squatted, callous, dignified, always ready to withstand the onslaught of the mightiest gale, impervious alike to sunshine and storm.

This was one of the crag's bright days, when the elements were kindly. With its green cushion, the crust of lichen upon its base, many tufts of weed and grass tightly embedded in its chinks, the genial sun showing up all its beauties, the hoary sentinel looked quite smart.

In the strip of shade her newly-made friend cast beside him, Mary Stapleton sat down to her task. Thoroughness in all she undertook being part of her nature, it was not long before she became so engrossed in her occupation that she might have still been in the Rue Hébert for all she saw or heard. As she read on, noting and correcting, the lights and shades of her essay found reflection on her expressive face. At times a cloud, as some dark passage was reached; a smile, or curl of the lip, when the professor's theories provoked, in turn, approval or contempt.

Somebody was watching Mary with much interest from the opposite side of Lonely Creek. She also was

resting under cover of a rock, and as it was no more than a tadpole compared with its neighbour the toad, afforded but scant refuge from the sun. Presently this lady rose to seek the more secluded protection of a bathing-box. Seated on a camp-stool, she still kept Mary's figure within sight. She appeared to be in no hurry to move on or return. Nor was she, in any appreciable degree, affected by the superb change which the inflowing water wrought upon the channel, but recently a wide stretch of sand, relieved by pools and inlets, where the natives digged and plodded. This watcher, with the sallow skin, cold, grey eyes, and set, emotionless features, had apparently only one object that noontide. She was certainly accomplishing it with a lynx-like persistency worthy of much praise.

When Mary at length moved, and, starting to her feet, was recalled to a sense of her surroundings, the other shifted her stool to avoid recognition. Presently she slipped out of her shelter, and, lowering her veil, passed slowly round to the other side of Roch-Kroum.

Let us leave her there for a while, as she paces thoughtfully to and fro, and return to industrious Mary. Her beloved waters would seem to be speaking eloquently to her, if one might judge by the fixed gaze with which she regarded the oncoming ripples. Were they talking of past distress, or future hopes or apprehensions? Tears stood in her eyes, it is true, but she need not therefore be sad—it is possible to weep for joy. Happily this lonely woman had not as yet reached that pitiable state when such Heaven-sent solace is withheld.

‘Yes, they tell me I have not worked in vain. That what I have tried for so long is at last perfect. My book will succeed—I feel, I know it will! Why, then,

am I so listless and unhappy before such joyful news? Because,' Mary rested her cheek upon her open palm as she mused sorrowfully, 'behind it all I seem to read warning, blame, worse still, reproach, for attempting to win success by such unworthy means. My wavelets give me no single word of praise or encouragement. They only tell me the cold, bare truth, which I have begged for.' Mary rose and stamped her foot upon old Roch-Kroum. 'Am I to believe them, like a stupid school-girl?' (The devil was at her elbow now). 'To give up all this labour, sacrifice ambition, money, freedom, the world's sweet favour? Am I, who have endured so much without a wince, to be turned from my purpose by some sentimental folly? Mary, where is your sense, your strength of will? Yet,' as the water crept up nearer and nearer, with its soft, plaintive tones, 'my love has never lied—why am I wicked enough to doubt it now? Who could look upon its lovely crest and disbelieve? I am sure the waves are telling me they will cast me off if I do not listen to them. Then how wretched I should be, for sympathy is scarce indeed.'

From her Creole mother Mary had learnt this romantic lesson, which had clung to her as a sacred legend throughout her sad, distressful life. She who, by birth, education, refinement, was all unsuited to struggle with the vulgar fate into which she had been forced, held on with great tenacity to those cherished recollections of happier days. In how many hours of temptation and suspense had she not been sustained through their instrumentality? She might long ere this have been broken upon the wheel of harshness and neglect but for that grand courage which those earliest teachings inspired. For instance, what a simple lesson

was this one of the waves. Yet, surrounded by all its holy associations, it had taken absolute hold upon Mary's Faith. To have put aside the fancy as superstitious or foolish would have been, in her eyes, little short of an insult to a beloved parent's memory. Round the sea, and all things belonging to it, there shone the brightest halo of allegory, which, if romantic, was at least pure and healthy. Hence, if Mary thought that the waters counselled her to forego even this great prize for which she had struggled, she would unhesitatingly obey their commands. She took up her pages again. How innocent they looked in their brown cover, each folio carefully numbered and margined. What a wealth of study, research and learning, was focused into that small space. How many thousands had not been already influenced by that seductive 'religion'? How many more of her countrymen would follow when her own efforts brought the new theories home to them for their enlightenment? It would be hard, indeed, to throw away this golden opportunity of gaining her end, of earning distinction in the world of letters, by means of what she had persuaded herself was a cultured translation. But if this sea, which was in reality her revered mother, told her the sacrifice must be made, that was enough, be the wrench ever so acute.

With that brave resolution there stole over Mary such a feeling of peace and contentment, to which she had long been a stranger. A heavy load was lifted off her mind. Gradually she recognised in its true light the enormity of the sin she had been about to commit—for it would be the vilest of sins to send forth that book into the world with all its villainous purport and suggestiveness.

Had she been held, day after day, in some devilish grip, that she could have fed her intellect with such horrible diet? Heaven bless this corner, then, which had recalled her to right and reason before it was too late. Now she understood all the discontent, the restlessness, which had weighed upon her soul for weeks.

Yes, every scrap should be destroyed that very afternoon, lest temptation assailed her afresh. She would not insult those blue waters by casting such heresies into their depths. They should meet their just desserts only in the cruel, unsparing Fire. Mary would seek some quiet spot, and in the flames rid herself of that hateful treatise. She would not feel safe until the last page was burnt, for once already she had been artfully entrapped. Afterwards, she would turn her talents to worthier ends. She would write an article lashing her late favourite with the bitterest ridicule she could command. Surely this would be pious work, for which God must quicken her brain. This done, she would seek inspiration from Roussoff itself for one grand effort. Here was a rich mine indeed for the writer! Could anybody wish for a more unique combination of attractions to start upon?

A place with a Russian name, where the people dressed on Sundays like Spaniards, and talked Welsh; a port whose historical associations were Scotch; a church with a steeple of incongruous design; natives who, even when tipsy, were reverential and courteous. To say nothing of unlimited studies of character in a hotel full of oddities. If that were not enough material for producing a book of no mean originality, Mary did not know where to look for it. Then there was a host of lore to fall back upon, if necessary, at the period of the smugglers and privateers who had in-

fested the coast in bygone days. Mary might introduce her namesake into the story. Indeed anything about Roussoff without mention of her would be imperfect. Why, it would be a positive disgrace to neglect this chance. Only let these hateful sheets, with their ignoble suggestions, be got rid of, and this new ambition should be grappled with at once.

With another fond glance at the sea, now sparkling gaily at her feet, as if rejoicing at Mary's decision, the woman rose to carry out her intentions. After all, there was some pleasure in living, although she had at times been wicked enough to doubt it. Certainly she would never find happiness if she went on translating such dreadful books as these, so the sooner this was removed the better. Now she saw her duty so clearly, her recent blindness seemed incredible. She blushed to think of the wasted hours she had spent in the company of this professor, who must have already spread untold mischief around him. She had been within an ace of following his example! Away, then, with every vestige of her weakness.

Mary passed quickly along the little plateau on the western side of Roch-Kroum, and prepared to descend to the shore. Approaching her across the rough pathway was somebody she should surely know. Why, it was Miss Susie Cone of Virginia State. What could have brought her to Roussoff on Mary's very heels? In her surprise, Mary ran towards her friend with outstretched hands. Suddenly she stopped, her joy turned to dread. Could Miss Cone have come with another warning that her husband was hunting her down? Was there no rest for her, even in this beautiful corner of the earth? Only a few minutes before she had been so happy in her new resolution. It was

inhuman to persecute a poor defenceless creature thus. O God, when would it all end?

The American came forward quickly.

'Now don't you be troubled, "Madame Traill." I know what's the matter. Things are just going lovely.'

'He is not following me—you are sure of it?'

'I'm no fibber, my dear—at least only now and then,' replied the American, with a humorous expression. 'You've found a queer sort of place for your holiday. It's quiet down here and no mistake.'

'I came with that object.'

'Well, I guess you've found it. Now you must show me the sights, please.'

Mary was trembling with agitation.

'No, I cannot do that at present. Oh, Miss Cone, I hope you are hiding nothing from me? If you have any news of him, in pity's name tell me at once. I cannot bear suspense.'

'Now you take a walk along the shore with me. I've been looking at that island yonder till I feel kind o' dismal. I began to think you'd got stuck to that rock.'

'I was at work. I forgot everything. But it is over now,' cried Mary excitedly. 'I have been a blind, wicked woman, dear Miss Cone—God forgive me. It is terrible to think how nearly I was lost.'

Miss Cone looked keenly at her companion. She was a sharp woman, but this speech puzzled her. Could the English lady's position have been tempting her to make away with herself? If so, it was indeed fortunate she had followed her to Roussoff. From the first this Madame Traill had interested her. Now she was doubly curious about her history. She did not, therefore, propose losing sight of her until she had been reasoned into a healthier frame of mind.

‘Well, anyway, I’ve found you,’ she said. ‘We’re going to have a real gay time. Perhaps you’ll consider it an ungracious remark, but I don’t think my relations will bother me much here—there’s no promenade for showing off their gowns. So we two’ll just have the run of Roussoff together. That will be real nice, won’t it?’

Mary turned towards Miss Cone with a piteous look.

‘It is more than good of you to be so cheerful, my generous friend. But I fear it is only to prepare me for something dreadful. Pray do not keep me on the rack any longer.’

‘Now, is Susie one of that sort? Bother that island, I can’t get it out of my sight. Isn’t there a single tree over there? Don’t you be hasty.’ The American placed her hand gently on Mary’s arm. ‘If there was any danger, you wouldn’t find me so spry. It’s just a bit of fun, that’s all. When you know me better, you’ll notice I often break out like this—particular down by the ocean. You see, directly I come within smell of it, I’m that strong I scarce know myself. Now, if you’re naughty again, I’ll go straight away back to Paris.’

‘I promise to be good. Only, remember, you must hide nothing from me.’

‘Of course I’ll tell everything. You must keep well in mind that the story finishes cheerful, though it may seem a trifle unpleasant in parts. If you’ll do so, we shall get along splendid. Suppose we sit down?’

Then Miss Cone narrated with characteristic precision of detail how, the same afternoon Mary left, she had been disturbed in her studies by a second visit from Mr Stapleton. This time he came stumbling downstairs after an ineffectual attempt to enter

Mary's apartment. He was more excited than before, although the American was careful to tone down the actual state of the man, who, balked in his search, had been very objectionable. But Miss Cone was not easily intimidated, meeting the intruder's outbursts with her customary firmness. On this occasion Mr Stapleton was evidently sure that his wife and 'Madame Traill' were one. His wrath, therefore, at having been (as he delicately put it) 'choused' was considerable. Of course he meant to find her, darkly hinting that it would fare ill with anybody conniving at her concealment, a threat which did not appear to possess much terror for the strategic Miss Cone.

'I should be sorry, indeed, if others suffered for my misfortunes,' Mary put in gently at this point of the narrative.

'Don't you be afraid,' exclaimed her companion, tightening her lips. 'I've been a match for more than one man, and don't feel like getting any softer towards them as I grow older. At best they're a mean, deceitful lot. But, to re-sume, as the story-books say. After I'd given this precious specimen a bit of advice I guess he'll not forget in a hurry, I just told him straight out "Madame Traill" had gone on a long, lone journey—so she has—that it was no use trying to extract any information about her from me. If he hits on her track, I shall be somewhat surprised.'

'He may think I am dead,' Mary murmured.

'What matter if he do? Anyway, you're parted enough already. Well, when I had taken my tea, I made up my mind I'd follow you. So I packed up my trunk sharp, locked the door, gave the key to that surly *concierge*, took the car right away, and—here Susie is.'

Mary sat very still. The wind had freshened, as if it wanted to hurry on the tide in its ever-recurring duties. Outside, many white-sailed boats were scudding and tacking merrily to and fro. The governess heeded them not. Had she done so, no doubt they would have reminded her of the dinghies she had watched so often, engaged in similar tactics, at the reach by Spade-Oak Ferry. Involuntarily Mary uncovered her head to the breeze, letting it frolic as it willed through her soft tresses, which had kept their gloss through all her sorrows. The worn, weary look was on her face once more as she turned towards Miss Cone.

‘Dear, you were not needlessly harsh with my—husband? Tell me, did he appear better—a little repentant? I am not a vindictive woman, Miss Cone. If I could but think he had given up his evil ways, I should be the first to rejoice. I might even forgive all, except—’ Mary hid her face in her hands.

Miss Cone was neither a sentimental nor a demonstrative person. But she possessed as kindly a heart as any in or out of Virginia State. Perhaps that is why she felt a rising in her throat—why she busied herself so assiduously with the novel occupation of stringing a lapful of shells together? Might not the sight of a fellow-creature bowed down under the distress of bitter wrong and insult have stirred some tender chord, silent through long years? Of course it would be a libel on Miss Cone’s strong-mindedness to hint that her eyes were moist. Whatever the cause, the American did not answer the question. Presently, however, she said something quite irrelevant, to the effect that she was ‘just hungry enough to be

desperate' if she didn't come across a 'good square meal' shortly.

Mary raised her head. Pitifully she repeated her inquiry.

'Just you believe I was as gentle as a lamb with him,' Miss Cone replied. 'As for his looks, I've seen handsomer Britishers, though I daresay he'd pass in a crowd. Repentance? Well, to be absolute frank, I didn't notice much of that commodity about him.'

As a matter of fact, Mr Stapleton had presented all the deplorable signs which indulgence in vicious courses inevitably stamps upon its victims. It was not a picture Miss Cone cared to dwell upon. She shuddered at the thought of this poor lady beside her being still bound to such a brute, when in her own country proof of one tittle of his transgressions would have set her free long ago. This English law, which held man and woman thus, was indeed a harsh one. The sooner it was altered the better. Its existence was a disgrace to nineteenth century civilisation.

'Well, I suppose I am safe for a while at anyrate,' Mary sighed. 'But the future is very, very dark.'

This dismal prophecy at once roused Miss Cone to action.

'I'm disposed to think it is, with starvation close on us. I guess we'll move back, and see if we can't strike a creamery, or some other place. Otherwise, there'll be a skeleton on the shore, for the gulls to fly around, before the sun's down.'

'Pray forgive my horrid selfishness. Yes, you must return at once. You will easily find my hostess, Madame Joubert. She is quite the oracle of Roussoff, and knows everybody. She will get you some lunch directly. She and her husband are hospitality

itself ; they have often expressed a wish to make your acquaintance. The old people are sure to be either at the inn or strolling along the shore in search of me. I could return also, but,' holding up her packet, 'this must be burnt to ashes first.'

'Oh, my! what's that?' exclaimed Miss Cone, suspicious of Mary's behaviour in her present depressed state.

'Only a few papers I have determined to destroy before the day is out. I shall have no peace until it is done. How I detest the sight of them! Good, kind friend, if you have a spark of regard for me, or concern for my soul hereafter, do not try to dissuade me now I have firmly made up my mind.'

Miss Cone had evidently come to Roussoff in the nick of time. There was no telling what eccentric conduct this poor lady might be guilty of. Why, she actually wanted to make away with the very thing she had told Susie quite recently was the only one which kept her mind at ease ; might ultimately bring her what she wanted, namely, release from an unhappy marriage. Such a suicidal act must be stopped at all costs. The American was getting more and more interested in her fellow-lodger. All notion of returning fled before the necessity of at once bestirring herself to drive away this singular delusion. So Miss Cone laughed, stating that the idea must be at once given up ; that it was evident Roussoff's air was bringing the humorous side of Madame Traill's character into prominence, with other pleasant banter.

'I am perfectly serious ; pray do not misunderstand me.' Mary clasped her hands about her companion's arms, continuing with nervous energy. 'Listen. If your eyes were suddenly opened to the truth that for

months your Better Nature had been perverted by some vile, insidious foe—your mind poisoned against all that was noble, pure, worthy in mankind—could you rest until you had tried to rid yourself of the loathsome cause?’

Miss Cone said that, although she had trotted about Europe considerably, she had happily never been called upon to decide so delicate a point. It was difficult, therefore, to say what, under similar circumstances, she would have done. She might, however, incidentally mention that she was not good at ‘guessing co-nundrums on an empty bread-basket.’

‘Alas, it is no riddle,’ sighed Mary. ‘Suppose you found that what you had hoped would bring an honest alleviation, in work turned out to be only a snare—some devilish wile which set itself to shake your Faith—entangle you in an agony of sinful Doubt? God! what punishment is severe enough for one who puts her hand to so detestable an end? When I think of the hours I have wasted over my translation, I am filled with inexpressible shame. How can I ever look those innocent little darlings in the face again—I, their teacher, bound by every moral law, to guide them aright? They would hate me, if they knew what I had done.’

Miss Cone thought not.

‘It wasn’t your fault, my dear. How can you tell what a book’s got inside the cover till you come to inquire? I shouldn’t bother my head further. At least, you’ve got dis-traction over it; you’ll be able to tell your friends something they mustn’t read. It’s a trifle disappointing having spent so long turning it into English, all for nothing. Now you’ll have to console yourself with some better occupation.’

‘Yes,’ cried Mary, ‘I had decided to do so. I am

going to write about this funny old Roussoff. Do help me—I mean with ideas and the plot, which is always so difficult. How I should like you as a *collaborateur*.'

'Why certainly, I will help, though it's not much in my line. Indeed, I don't quite know what you mean by *coll—coll*—what's the word?'

'My fellow-labourer and general literary help. I have often thought, with my unruly notions, I required some sober, practical-minded person to keep me in order. You are the very one, Miss Cone. We shall have an enormous success.'

The other laughed drily.

'You're getting better. Fancy Susie going in for writing! I wonder what her relations would say to that: they put her down already as rather daft.'

'So much the better. You shall give them some startling incidents, on the strength of your affliction. Now, please, go back, have a hearty lunch, and we will begin our first chapter this very afternoon. Good-bye, for I see a capital place behind that wall to light my bonfire.'

Although more rational, Miss Cone did not consider her patient well enough to be humoured to that extent.

'Why not let Susie have a peep at the papers first—'

'No, no; not for worlds! I entreat you not to insist upon such a thing. They are not fit for your honest hands to touch, much less for you to read.'

'No? Well you said you'd like me to be your *coll*—something. Suppose we begin now by burning that old professor's book together?'

Mary hesitated, looking searchingly at Miss Cone.

'You really mean it? I expect you think it some foolish fad, but you must bear with me. If you promise not to ask to see a single line, I will gladly consent.'

'I promise faithful,' said Miss Cone.

'I will trust you,' answered Mary.

An hour later, Madame Joubert, with her Jean, slowly mounted the eminence where Roch-Kroum rested. A spectacle, which only added another perplexing item to those 'manners and customs of se English' the *charcutière* vainly endeavoured to get at the bottom of, met their gaze. For below, at no great distance, under shelter of a wall, sat their visitor and a strange lady watching the remains of a slumbering fire. It was not dead yet, because Mary Stapleton now and again poked it with a stick, when a sickly flame leapt up and many black particles flew about. Whatever curious occupation they had been engaged in, the two seemed merry enough. Especially could Mary's voice be heard from time to time raised in quite joyous laughter.

'The English are indeed a droll nation,' Monsieur Joubert gave out pensively between the puffs at his cigar.

'I have it, Jean,' his wife cried presently. 'It is the peek-neck *Anglaise!* I have long wished to see one. But where is the kettle? We must clamber down at once.' Madame Joubert brandished her umbrella to attract attention. 'How unlucky, they do not see us. Follow me, my cherished one.'

Monsieur Joubert, who thought his unwonted exertions had earned him a nap, rose from his camp-stool with a sigh. He did not share his wife's slavish admiration of the English to the point of investigating this 'peek-neck,' which (whatever its fascination) was at anyrate concluded. However, his Amélie must be obeyed. Monsieur prided himself on never thwarting

her wishes, unless they were really outrageous. As she tolerated the pork-butcher's peculiarities to an equally liberal extent, it is proved they were altogether an exceptional couple.

'Here she is!' cried Mary, as she saw Madame Joubert labouring across the shingle. She gave a final poke to all that remained of the famous treatise and her own translation of it. 'Mind, dear Miss Cone, not a word of our confidences to anybody. I am sure you will respect my wishes.'

The American nodded.

'Susie's word is her bond. Don't you fail either.'

'I will write this very night. You have indeed been patient and forbearing. You have also done me a lasting service I shall never forget or be able to thank you for enough. God will reward you. Well, Madame Joubert, I told you I should be quite Bohemian in my conduct to-day. I can see you forgive me already. Let me present my friend—Miss Susie Cone, Madame Joubert. Miss Cone has decided to make a short stay here.'

The *charcutière* advanced as usual with hands extended—she would have embraced Miss Cone for two pins—and bade the American welcome to Roussoff.

'It is se most charming place in se world. I hope you stop long time. It give me much enchantment to show you all se sights. You read sure of se great fig-tree? It is our—what you call *coquettérie*?—of Roussoff. Also se *viviers* is wonderful, where all se crabs and lobsters crawl about. No? You hear not of sem? What you do with your friend, *méchante*, that you tell her not?' shaking a reproofing finger at Mary. 'And what for you have English peck-neek without to tell me?'

'My dear madame, what makes you think we have been picnicking? Miss Cone was good enough to help me destroy some papers for which I had no further use—that is all.'

'No peek-neek! I did sink I find it at last. Never mind, we will arrange one together very soon.'

When the party had been joined by Monsieur Joubert, whose progress over the shingle was somewhat of an effort, they turned inland, reaching Roussoff by a zigzag course of lane, or through an occasional farmyard, which did credit to the pioneering instincts of even 'Madame Christophe Colombe.' It was a walk which Mary long remembered. Relieved of the strain put upon her by the vicious book which had well-nigh made her its convert; feeling once more the inestimable blessing of returning health, her better self roused to a long-deferred promise by the sound judgment of Miss Cone, surely it would be the basest ingratitude to reject the present joys held out by her Creator, by Whose Will all this beauty flourished? For was not His Hand upon everything, from each tiny, delicate leaf of fern or flower peeping out from between the stones of the dwarf walls they passed beside, to that boundless Sea, whose precious voice still lingered in her ears? Yes, He had indeed been merciful. Mary must strive by every means in her power to show gratitude for her rescue in the only right and acceptable way.

Madame Joubert's chief object in conducting her party back by the short cuts was to effect an introduction to the Hôtel Maison Blanche, the other popular inn of Roussoff. Besides, she dearly loved a chat with its landlady, Madame Le Sage, a Roussovite born and bred, who knew the natural history of every man,

woman and child, in the port : it was, in fact, from this source the Parisian got much of her priceless information concerning the natives. Her establishment boasted an extensive maritime connection, no Welsh or Jersey captain, mate or seaman, ever neglecting to pay a prompt (and often prolonged) visit to its hospitable parlour, which was so redolent of rum and other stimulants. From such patrons Madame Le Sage had contrived to pick up a more than smattering of English, which, if not very choice or grammatical, was distinctly impressive, and made her a shining light amongst her acquaintances. She was a shrewd, business-like little woman, always alive to the main chance. Her face was tanned to mahogany colour. She had superlative teeth ; black hair, screwed up tightly on either side of her head into a couple of knobs, used occasionally as cushions for her knitting-needles ; beady eyes, capable of reckoning up her customers and their scores with unerring accuracy, as more than one bibulous potato salesman could testify.

As our friends approached, business was slack at the inn. It certainly tried its best to prove the appropriateness of its sign by a lavish employment of white-wash, for it was quite glaring in the sunlight. Every door and window was open, as if inviting the public to enter and judge for themselves whether the domestic economy and management were not perfect. Two fixed tables stood on either side of the entrance. On one a loquacious parrot was performing gymnastics on its perch ; at the other sat Madame Le Sage, knitting, with a vase of splendid gladioli by her side. On a black board by the kitchen window the items of the morning's breakfast were chalked up. A very liberal repast it seemed to have been.

This hotel had quite a modern appearance. Perhaps it was old, but how, in that case, anybody could subject it to the indignity of so much whitewash, was incomprehensible, in Mary's eyes little short of sacrilege. Moreover, its view over the harbour was obstructed by an ugly shed. Miss Cone's attention was at once arrested by the bill of fare.

'They go in strong for fish in these parts. Now, just look. Here's all sorts.'

'You see it is Friday. They think we ought to fast.'

'Oh my! Do they indeed? Well, I've done that. I'm glad I didn't fix myself up at this hotel though.'

'By-the-bye, Miss Cone, where are you staying? I quite forgot to ask.'

'Nowhere at present, my dear. I left my trunk yonder at the terminus.'

'But you must find a lodging somewhere. What shall we do? How pleasant it would be if there was a vacant room where I am staying. Would that be agreeable?'

'We haven't fallen out yet in Paris, have we? So I don't expect we shall at Roussoff,' was Miss Cone's characteristic rejoinder.

It was quite hopeless to attempt to lure Madame Joubert from her gossip, so Mary and Miss Cone set off arm-in-arm to find 'Monsieur Jacques,' who, they were told, was Mary's landlord.

'Monsieur Jacques,' it seemed, had formerly owned the Café de la Marine. Having saved money from his venture, he had retired to a cottage behind, presumably unable to tear himself away from former associations. Roussoff knew him well, therefore; a small boy at once directed the visitors to his domicile. No, he was not at home, his wife, who had a dulcet singsong voice, and a mild, patient face, which pro-

claimed her a native of the island of Batz, informed Mary. But he was only playing skittles at the Marine with some boys from the fish laboratory; he could be fetched instantly. Indeed, Madame Jacques—Mary never heard the couple's surname, which, as a matter of fact, seemed a superfluous adjunct with most families at Roussoff—did not disguise her readiness to summon her husband from his exercise.

'Monsieur Jacques' presented a singular contrast to his meek little helpmate in the nightcap. He was a tall, wiry Breton, with close-cropped hair, and he wore a brown worsted jersey. His face showed unmistakable signs of much exposure to inclement weather, which, as he was an ex-man-of-war's man, was as it should be. Mary felt quite alarmed when she saw him bearing down upon her across his garden. And the man's voice! He was bawling as if still in a Bay of Biscay gale. Perhaps he was annoyed at the interruption to his game of skittles.

'I think we'd better re-treat,' said Miss Cone. 'He looks kind o' dangerous.'

To their relief, Monsieur Jacques came up holding out his hand. A smile played on his weather-beaten features. It is true he shouted, but his words were of the kindest. He was overwhelmed with regret that his visitors should have been kept waiting. In what might he have the extreme felicity of serving them? When Monsieur Jacques heard Mary's modest request, he extended his arms—which might have compared favourably with a gorilla's—as if desirous to convey the whole of Roussoff then and there over for the accommodation of the travellers. 'An apartment.' Why, assuredly they could have one! If madame would only give herself the trouble of stepping over to

the Hôtel des Bains, he would see his friend Monsieur Phélipot and arrange— Or perhaps at the Marine—

Mary stopped Monsieur Jacques, to explain, when his face fell somewhat. He feared, to his unutterable chagrin, that all his rooms in the town were let. Never mind, he would eject a tenant in order that the ladies might be spared one moment's inconvenience. 'Hold!' and he brightened, 'there is *Monsieur le Curé*.' Gracious, that would never do, thought Mary. This strong-lunged person was never going to disturb an ecclesiastic in that high-handed style. Excommunication would be a mild punishment for such an act. 'Yes,' piped Madame Jacques, 'he must leave to-day, for his month's vacation is ended.' 'That will be delightful,' Mary exclaimed. 'I don't mean getting rid of the priest, but having you so near me, dear Miss Cone.' Terms were easily arranged, when Monsieur Jacques insisted on escorting the ladies back to see that all was made ready for their reception. Sure enough, seated beside the driver of the one-horsed omnibus, which they met crossing the square, was the identical *curé*, with shovel hat, carpet bag and umbrella—all complete. In his hand was the inevitable prayer-book, over which his eyes were bent. Miss Cone irreverently whispered that only one of them was fixed upon the page, the other being employed in taking in the strangers. In this, however, she was of course mistaken.

'Oh my! you never expect me to sleep on top of that con-trivance, do you?' Miss Cone exclaimed when she saw the erection which was a fair type of the beds in Roussoff. 'I'm not much at gymnastics.'

'It only wants a hop, skip and jump, and you're inside in no time,' laughed Mary.

'I daresay, but at my age skipping don't seem to

come quite natural somehow. What's this thing like a powder puff?'

Miss Cone promptly removed the coverlet, which had excited her irony. Otherwise, the room gave complete satisfaction, everything being spotlessly clean and very neat.

Mary threw back the window.

'How delicious!' as her loved breezes filled the room with their perfume. 'Why, I declare, if our restless, indefatigable Amélie is not below talking to somebody else! Her vivacity is really astonishing. Look, but don't let her see us if you can help.'

This time Madame Joubert was chatting with the diminutive old newspaper-woman, who trotted about in a straw hat, with a case slung round her, distributing the *Figaro* and *Petit Journal* to her subscribers. Doubtless she possessed a fund of knowledge concerning Roussoff and its visitors which well repaid a gossip. Madame Joubert evidently thought so, for the interview was long, animated, and doubtless exhaustive.

'Now I must go and write my letter. Dear Miss Cone, forgive my weakness of this morning. How can I tell you what a support your friendship and advice has been to me. I see my duty clear before me now. I have found my senses.'

'When Susie Cone takes a liking to anybody (which she isn't rash about), she doesn't drop her in a hurry. Now you just go and get that duty-letter off your mind straight away.'

'You are quite right. I shall not feel happy until it is written.' Mary kissed the American.

Then she hurried away to her room, locked the door, and poured out her heart, on paper, to Shirley Wodehouse in the way we already know.

CHAPTER IV.

SUCCESS.

THOSE who look back upon the sensations experienced on receiving their first payment for literary labour will understand Miss Nora Wodehouse's feelings when the spell of frequent rejections was, at length, broken. What mattered now the months of suspense and disappointment? Where was the sting of those polite notes, with their rolls of returned manuscript? The moment the girl's eager eyes fell upon that long-looked-for remittance, all thought of former slights vanished. As she beheld the actual proof that her efforts were at length appreciated, all the discouragements which had assailed the plucky little story-teller were forgotten. With those angelic lines spread out—read and re-read to make sure of their reality—there seemed no summit of ambition to which she could not climb. Truly Miss Nora had sat with her bonnet on to some purpose, if only this were the outcome of her alacrity. For it was from that very editor she had personally interviewed, in answer to his general inquiry as to her capabilities, this rich reward had resulted.

'Sister, sister!' cried Nora up the stairs, 'only fancy, they have sent me a whole golden guinea for "Katie's

Temptation." Do come down. Was there ever such good-fortune?'

'There, now, what did I tell you all along?' Shirley embraced the talented authoress. 'Everybody knows perseverance such as yours must be recognised sooner or later. Accept my warmest congratulations, pet. How delighted our Mary will be. When you're rich and famous, don't forget your improvident sister, who is born extravagant, with no idea of the value of money—not the least little bit in the world.'

'Except when she is putting by her earnings for others. Yes, it has been a long while to wait. But how short the time seems now recompense has come! Shirley, will you believe it, they actually ask me for more. Listen to this. "The Editor of *Oceana* presents his compliments to Miss Wodehouse, and encloses one pound one shilling for 'Katie's Temptation.' He will be glad to give his best consideration to any further manuscripts Miss W. may submit for his approval." I propose framing that letter, as a charm against disappointments. I wonder if I shall receive the proofs to-morrow.'

(Next to the joy of having her story accepted, came the anticipated delight of seeing it in print.)

'Scarcely so soon, I fancy. Now I've got a surprise for you. Do you know the old saying that it never rains but it pours?'

'Assuredly. Miss Pridham often quotes it.'

'Well, just read that: you mustn't expect to have all the plums, you know.'

It was a note from Miss Felinda Turnbull, congratulating Shirley on having made another conquest. This time it was the treasurer of a well-known charitable institution who had succumbed to the songstress's

vocal charms, and had commissioned Miss Turnbull to solicit her valuable aid for the forthcoming festival of the society, when he was to preside. 'Of course there will be a fee, as some trifling acknowledgment of your services,' Miss Felinda delicately put it. 'Moreover, I believe, oranges and ginger-wine are provided gratuitously for the artistes. If you will please furnish me with the names of the ballads you propose to sing, I will inform Mr Button. This opportunity will be invaluable as a genteel introduction to the first stages of a professional calling should you eventually decide to adopt the concert-room as a means of livelihood. All congratulations, my dear young friend. Priscilla unites with me in sincere regards to yourself and your sister,' etc.

'Isn't that sweet? Of course I have accepted, though what I shall feel like when I get on to the platform, goodness only knows. I have chosen "Purple Heather" and "Wavelets."'

'My darling, I am so glad. What a celebrity you will soon become. How thankful we should be for this improvement in our worldly positions.'

'Are we not, Miss Precision, who talks like a book? I am sure we are. So will Mary and Neil be when we tell them. It will be an odd thing to me if we do not start our carriage before the year is out. Poor Neil! I do hope he is not overworking himself in that horrid city. Do you know, Nollekins'—Shirley took her favourite seat on the footstool at her sister's feet—'I am getting quite anxious about that boy—beg pardon, young man—he looks so fagged out every evening. It must be wretched slaving day after day at a business, and with people one despises, though he is far too conscientious to spare himself on that

account. What an objectionable person this Mr Argent must be, with his patent-leather boots, his slang, and general vulgarity. I daresay he is kind enough in his way; but what a way! It must jar horribly on Neil's sensitive nerves to be thrown with such men as he describes. How nice it would be if he could become a poet. But I am told it is so difficult to make that pay, unless one has positive genius.'

Norah sighed.

'If we thought his work were really affecting his health, we ought to persuade him to leave, and seek some more congenial occupation, for health must be studied before all things. Indeed, life can have little usefulness without it. From what Mr Hossack said during the last visit he paid us, I imagine he in a measure shares our anxiety. By-the-bye, what a singular circumstance his leaving so abruptly for such novel experiences as a London boarding-house must afford. I hope he is comfortable.'

Shirley's cheeks were red. (How blind little Nora was!)

'Perhaps he has gone to study character. I should think there was plenty of opportunity for it at that sort of place. Besides, don't you see, if he hadn't left, we could not have had our Mary at the Cottage. That would have been most unfortunate.' Then the younger girl continued rapidly, 'Isn't it wonderful how she has picked up since she has been with us? If we can only keep her from worrying about that wretched husband. What a history hers has been. Yet you writers are always racking your noddles to invent plots and mysteries, with such ready-made materials under your very noses!'

'Yes, Mary's has indeed been a sad, sad story, with

this mill-stone round her neck. But it would be very wrong to utilise her sufferings for the purposes of fiction. Even were consent given, it would require a most uncommon talent to fashion such materials without giving offence. Power of this kind is given to few. Such a record would have to be touched with extreme delicacy. I do hope Mary will continue to employ herself with the wholesome distraction she has taken up.'

'You funny dear! I believe you get more old-fashioned every day. Of course she will go on, and make another success bigger than the last one—we all mean to succeed. In fact, I have come to the conclusion there are only two words in the dictionary—success and failure. The latter is the ugliest one I know; it is not to be allowed inside our doors, under any consideration. Tell me now, pretty Nora, you are very fond of cousin Neil, are you not? I mean, just a wee bit more than cousins usually are? Don't be afraid. I promise not to breathe a syllable to anybody.'

'Yes,' replied the elder slowly. 'I love him very dearly, although I fear I am quite unworthy of his great affection in return. Ever since our darling left us, I have felt bound to him by the most sacred ties. Yes, I do love him with all my heart and soul.'

'There, I was certain of it! Why shouldn't you, pray? There's nothing desperately wicked in that, unless you believe the old croakers who say people ought not to marry their cousins. I'm longing to be bridesmaid.'

'Hush, dear!' whispered Nora, overcome by such dreadful levity. 'I scarcely dare dream of such a thing as marriage.'

‘Really, my poppet? I’m always dreaming of it—for you, of course. Surely you’re not afraid of Neil turning out a brute, and beating you?’

‘Shirley, how shocking! What can have put such such a deplorable contingency into your head?’

‘Pardon, I quite forgot. Somehow I feel desperately frivolous to-day. Do you remember my promising that I would never chaff you again?’

‘Yes, at dear old Dresden.’

‘Haven’t I kept my promise religiously. Now let’s talk about something else. Do you think my white tarlatan can be titivated up for this city dinner? I haven’t the faintest idea how singers dress for those festivities, but, I expect, rather smart—smarter at least than they would for a penny reading. Ought I to wear my new Bertha, do you suppose? And about gloves? My only evening pair are long past mending, and smell horribly of benzine. I must have used quite a loaf of stale bread on them before I was reduced to that extremity.’

‘I have no doubt Miss Turnbull will put us right in respect of the proper costume to appear in. Nor am I anxious about your tarlatan. We will examine it together thoroughly. Before doing so, I want to speak to you upon a subject I have had in my mind for many weeks, and which your recent inquiry in regard to myself has made it somewhat easier for me to broach. Dear sister, it would give me such great joy to see you settled and happy.’

Shirley jumped to her feet at so amazing a proposition.

‘Me! My sweet child, what are you thinking of?’

Could this little woman, after all, have found out her secret? There was no knowing what feats of dis-

cernment these clever writers were capable of. Perhaps—oh dear, oh dear, if it were so!

‘I am quite serious ; you must not be pained. But I fancied there might be something between you and Mr—Ferguson.’

It seemed an eternity before that name was reached.

‘Our curate at St Cyprian’s—why, he’s only a boy!’

Shirley leant back and laughed merrily.

‘No, no, my little match-maker, you may make your mind quite easy on that score. I shall never be a clergyman’s wife—I am far too flighty.’

‘But boys grow into young men, and giddy girls become staid women,’ pursued Nora gravely. ‘Besides, he may get a living soon. He has accompanied you home so frequently, that I thought possibly—well, I have evidently been mistaken.’

‘You have, miss, most woefully. Mr Ferguson is no doubt a most worthy person ; but he is very mincing and prosy. Why do curates always have voices unlike other people? It is a penance to hear him intone.’

‘Whatever his peculiarities, he is an earnest worker, Shirley ; you must not ridicule him. From what I have remarked, I am also quite sure that he is attached to you.’

The young lady laughed more gaily than before.

‘Is he really ? Then, I am afraid, he will have to get over his attachment. Bless you, I’ve got heaps of admirers, who’ll all have to do the same, so he’ll be in good company. A “snip” from me and anyone of them would say “snap,” if I only held up my little finger. But, you see, I don’t say “snip,” and I don’t hold up my little finger. If ever there was anyone cut out

for an old maid, it's Shirley Wodehouse, as I've said many times. Why, I declare here's Mary back again. Come, sit down, Mary, and tell us all about your visits. How bonny you look this morning.'

It was a touching sight to see the affection of those former playmates, brought together again by a series of strange events. The wife, upon whom misfortune had indelibly set its mark; the dauntless girl, who, her pretended uselessness notwithstanding, was in all emergencies the mainstay of the household, as well as its brightest ornament. With the full knowledge of Mary Stapleton's sufferings, Shirley's great love for her had increased, until she considered no sacrifice unworthy, if it only secured her friend's happiness. Nor, after that first regretful outburst, had she ever reproached her for those broken promises during the days of trial and wavering. It was enough that her darling was with them. By every means in her power, it must be her constant endeavour to promote the comfort of one reduced, through no fault of her own, to a most pitiful position.

Let it not be thought that Shirley's mission had been an easy one. It had indeed taken a large amount of entreaty to coax Mary over to England. In her pride and independence, she at first persisted in declining all overtures to join the circle at Prospect Cottage. Later, when she had made up lost ground, and could contribute to the general expenses, she would consider the proposal. It would show unpardonable weakness were she to desert Paris now she was gaining a footing there. Rid of the professor's diabolical treatise, she breathed more freely. Already she felt better for her change to Roussoff—strong enough even to defy her husband's machinations. It

would be little short of madness to leave a city where she contrived to earn her bread honestly ; where she had made many friends ; which was, after all, a very pleasant capital to live in. Besides, she found in the French character a never-failing subject for study and reflection, doubly necessary now she intended to devote herself to the present healthier outlet in the field of literature. Things more settled, they might expect her any day. Meanwhile, both must be content to wait patiently.

Those were a few of the excuses Mary wrote to Shirley. What they really meant was, that she could not bring herself to accept monetary assistance even from one who loved her so dearly.

Under these circumstances, it said much for Shirley's tact and powers of persuasion that she finally succeeded in overcoming her friend's scruples without crossing the Channel to fetch her. The later autumn months found Mary comfortably settled at Prospect Cottage, on a mutual contributory plan, so cleverly devised by the versatile Nora that it nearly put this proud woman at her ease. Who shall describe the happiness which followed this reunion ? When Shirley heard from Mary's own lips the story of her wrongs, her heart went forth to her with, if possible, greater tenderness. That her dear schoolmate should have been singled out for such a grievous lot was indeed horrible—her gentle Mary, who was goodness itself, utterly incapable of giving anyone cause for behaving so basely. It is needless to say that much of the narrative of Mary's sufferings was toned down. Shirley's pure mind must not be shocked by more disclosures than were necessary to vindicate her action. Was it not enough to hint at that one vicious habit—her

husband's enslavement by the foul, degrading curse of drink—to raise a compassion and a storm of indignation from the girl, with the burning words, 'My darling! that there should be such wickedness in the world, and that it should find its way to you!' With the further reproach, 'Oh, why did you not confide sooner in me?' Before that just reproof Mary had bowed her head. 'I know I was wrong; I can only beg your forgiveness,' was her tearful answer. Shirley had kissed away those tears with the promise, faithfully kept, that never again, without permission, would she allude to this distressing subject. As for forgiveness, if it were needed, it was most freely granted without the asking. 'From to-day, then, we will forget that horrid picture, won't we, dear? How jolly we shall all be together. Cousin Neil you're sure to fall in love with at first sight—everybody does.'

Thus, amid happier surroundings, did the higher influences of Peace and Affection steal over Mary Stapleton once more, subduing her restlessness, calming many a wayward thought. Brightest blessing of all, her Faith and Trust, which in an evil hour had been so rudely assailed, came back to her anew.

This was the first real spring day when Shirley complimented her friend on looking so bonny.

It had been a concession to let Mary out alone, a tacit understanding existing that it was wiser for her to have companionship during her walks. Although she had been left so long unmolested, it would never do to relax precautions; at any moment that dreaded presence might overshadow her. Cruel and unjust as the law seemed to them, Nora and Shirley knew well that no authority they possessed, much less any entreaty, would avail were this man to insist on

claiming his own. But that fact should not hinder them from shielding Mary from injury. Under such harsh circumstances, they only recognised one law—the law of love and humanity. Therefore, they meant to stand by their friend, with all the strength the knowledge that they were doing right gave to them.

That morning Mary had been into town to pay a visit to her lawyer, and, appointments being costly, had contrived to squeeze a great deal into the short half-hour accorded. One would think that, if only out of sheer pity, the lagging steps of Justice would be quickened over her affairs. For upon its decree depended the momentous issue of ridding, or otherwise, a good woman from a dire oppression. But, as some may know to their cost, those preliminaries which culminate in the unsavoury disclosures of the divorce court are not to be hurried on by any such weak considerations as pity or sentiment for the unfortunate petitioners. Hence, Mrs Stapleton had to take her turn with others who clamoured at that stern gate for release. And a long, irritating process it proved to be.

Her decision once made, Mary had set to work with a will, building up her case in a masterly fashion, until she considered it as clear as day to the meanest capacity. She had very little money to spend over the unpleasant preliminaries. So, until all was ready, she did not seek professional aid. Unlike the simple Edward Foster, Mary was fully alive to the necessity of proof. Alas, enough existed to satisfy the most scrupulous of judges. She had only to carry her memory back to those awful days when suspicion gave place to certainty to produce overwhelming evidence. If witnesses must be produced, Mary could find them

—friends who, to his constant shame, had seen her husband in his drunken bouts. As for cruelty, had she not been forced to fly to the good Hollebhone sisters for protection? It certainly seemed a barbarous thing to have to summons those she loved into the witness-box; almost as heartless as having to drag her private affairs before the light, to become the common property of gossips. Why, with such convincing evidence of man's perfidy, this wretched publicity need be courted, Mary failed to comprehend. Surely she, who had never wittingly told an untruth, much less stooped to deceit, might be believed in so vital an appeal as this? She presumed her miserable story would be drawn up in approved legal jargon, and duly sworn to. Ought not that to be enough for every responsible person? Mary would try her utmost to avoid inflicting unnecessary pain upon anybody. But, come what might, she meant to stand firm now, shirking no demand of the law, however vexatious. In this resolution she knew that those whose friendship was worth having would see her through unto the end.

It had taken a long while to decide upon the only course open to her, unless she wished to intensify a harassed state which was beginning to tell upon her health. In the nick of time came a great support and incentive to exertion. In that very weapon which had so nearly turned in her hand to wound her soul, Mary found the means to prosper her worldly aims. Availing herself of the exhaustive study of that subtle book, she had produced a stinging satire upon its vaunted 'religion,' which found immediate recognition in one of the fortnightlies. How pleased that enlightened professor must have been when

Mary's pungent sarcasms met his gaze! What an irony in the fate which had transformed an almost certain convert into so implacable an enemy.

Mary had said good-bye to her wise, faithful counsellor the Sea, with its dancing waves. But, soothed by the sympathy ruling in this peaceful home, she found a new tonic for her brain. Strengthened thus, she gave full vent to those hitherto undeveloped powers with an ease which surprised her. Mary held that to spare one whose talents had been employed to so ignoble a purpose as endeavouring to beguile his fellow-creatures with false, injurious theories, would be to show an altogether mistaken clemency. Rather, in so righteous an exposure, she let herself go with all the strength of which she was capable. No contempt could be too bitter, no sting too sharp, for what was bad and vicious above the rest. A bright thought led Mary on. If only she could be the means of undoing but a portion of the harm which had been wrought; if her essay met with such favour as to warrant a translation at her hands, thus enabling her to meet her foe face to face upon his own vantage-ground. That healthy longing inspired many a brilliant passage, urged on her pen in feverish haste to catch the fancies whilst yet strong in their truth and earnestness. What joy if she could only learn that her warning had reached that old man's heart, to make him pause in his unholy work, and repent ere he went into eternity laden with so hideous a sin.

Then, when all was finished, and the package sent off, came the weary waiting for the reply of those she had entrusted with her first departure. Strong-minded Mary grew quite morbid for fear some ill might befall her treasure, or (worst fate of all) that its subject should

have been forestalled by another. Happily this publishing firm combined a somewhat rare consideration for the feelings of their contributors with that conventional courtesy which had impressed Miss Nora so much. Mary had not many days to wait for their reply—a precious, quick-winged message of acceptance.

Was it a weak thing that she, who had met so many misfortunes with a proud disdain, gave way before that joyful news, allowing the pent-up tears to flow unchecked over those few inanimate words, as she pressed them to her lips in an ecstasy of relief? When Mary viewed her conduct dispassionately, she decided that it was a very foolish proceeding; more unpardonable still, that she should have rushed forthwith into the kitchen—thereby rousing Miss Pridham from her afternoon snooze with dangerous abruptness—to enlist the nearest human sympathy available. Their estimable landlady, Mary could not but in fairness admit, was fully justified in her inquiry, ‘Bless us and save us, what’s happened to you now, ma’am? You’re all of a tremble.’ With the further delicate rebuke that, ‘at her (Miss Pridham’s) time of life, folks ought to be careful how they disturbed other folks so suddenlike after a hearty meal.’ Mary excused her inconsiderate entry by explaining that, if she had not found somebody to whom to exhibit the substantial reward of her endeavours, she would have gone crazy with delight—a notion which, strangely enough, did not at once commend itself to Miss Pridham’s perceptions.

Money! How welcome was the sight, how full of significance to Mary Stapleton. It meant the wiping-out of debt, which, however little it troubled the lenders, weighed heavily upon the borrower; the hope of now being able to hold her own equally with this Hamp-

stead household. Above all, written in letters of gold, shone out the possibility of an early liberation. Nor was this all the comfort that message brought. For Mary was invited to at once set about the proposed rendering of her own article into French, an idea—the editor was obliging enough to compliment her—‘both ingenious and practical.’ Nor did he doubt being able to ‘place’ the translation favourably ‘with a Parisian publishing house of repute.’ Finally, this nice gentleman asked Mary seriously to reconsider her request that the satire should appear anonymously, counselling her to stand boldly by her convictions. Who could fly in the face of so august an authority as the editor of a popular bi-monthly? It was a command which Mary must perforce obey, though her modesty would still have preferred the more obscure retreat of initials. Most of us appreciate commendation. From such a quarter it was doubly gratifying.

How sincere Nora and Shirley’s congratulations were need scarcely be told. In their unselfish devotion, they rejoiced in this piece of good-luck as if it had been their own. Nor was there a tinge of envy in the honest recognition of Mary’s talents and industry they spontaneously offered. When the number appeared with the essay, in all the glory of print and prominent display, the excitement at Prospect Cottage was prodigious. Later, the cheering whisper of success came northward, filling the woman’s heart with gratitude, that comforting knowledge of good purpose accomplished than which there are few sweeter balms, as those who write should know.

What an impetus the acceptance of her essay gave to one who had ere then known her energies cramped by the tortures of disappointment—dark hours when

her imagination lay torpid under the cruel lash of privation, when the intellect was numb. It seemed as if with one kindly stroke the barrier blocking the way to freedom had been removed. Who would not choose to enter upon that road which lay so wide and clear beyond? With self-denial, patience, application, what literary prize might she not win? Strange freak of fortune that she should, after all, reap her harvest of benefit from that book she had finally cast from her with such unutterable contempt. But in how different a method the result had been achieved. It was plain God had forgiven, that He was with her now. With this new light, inspiration had come, exorcising the demon which had once imperilled her soul. No wonder, then, with the evil clouds thus rolling off her life, to Shirley's eyes Mary Stapleton looked 'bonny' on that fine spring morning. Those who themselves have passed through the fire of desertion and want might have read in her face, or (in that surer index) the sad tones of her voice, a world of ineffaceable sorrow: few can be hunted and deceived as she had been without showing a scar. But, happily, Shirley did not detect signs which would have sorely distressed her. She firmly believed that her plan of bringing Mary to them had been blessed beyond her fondest dreams. The one remaining obstacle removed (and this would soon be done), her darling's happiness must be absolutely secured.

News? Yes, Mary had indeed much to tell them. Hers had been a twofold mission, each full of moment. For on the way to the lawyer's musty rooms in Stone Buildings, Mary had delivered the French rendering of her own essay—it was far too sacred to be entrusted to the post—at the office of the magazine to whose

appreciation she owed so much. Mary did not share the popular notion that editors are inaccessible, unrelenting persons, often autocratic; her very first experience proved the contrary. But she certainly felt nervous whilst awaiting the great man's leisure. As she glanced at the piles of books and periodicals heaped high on floor and counter, or ranged round the shelves, this fresh recruit thought of the many who must have sat where she did, with perhaps their one ewe lamb (in the shape of some precious story) clasped to a beating heart. How much might not have depended upon that momentous interview? Maybe, in some dull home where the bane of genteel poverty ruled, mouths were waiting to be fed, this being the means chosen to fill them. Had such a man or woman gone back, Mary wondered, with a great care lifted, or still depressed by a miserable despair? Then she fell to thinking that, however blank and wretched the future, unquenchable Hope must have come in time to cheer their tired hearts, and bid them persevere—Heaven sent, undying Hope, without which her own spirit would have failed long, long ago—Hope, almost as blessed as Time, the Avenger, the Healer, and the Comforter. Well, she must strive earnestly, when she overtook other toilers crossing the same treacherous sands, to cheer them by every means she could. Above all, she must tell them how true work brings its own great reward to the worker, let the issue be what it may. She could be eloquent on such a theme, for had she not found in work the surest, most infallible receipt for distraction, almost happiness? It was an honest reed, also. For, looking back into her past, Mary now clearly saw how, when brain and fingers lagged over her first effort, warning was in-

tended that no labour could be blessed which took up such a worthless subject. How blind and wicked she had been to defy that caution, forcing herself, through many a fit of lethargy, to finish her task. Why, after the light had broken in, all had been mere child's-play. Hand had been unable to keep pace with brain, or catch the fleeting inspirations quick enough. As a consequence, her recent commission had been finished some days before the time granted, and was in her pocket at that very moment. So that, if anybody in this world were entitled to extol the praises of this precious antidote, it was surely she who, in her own person, had proved its efficacy beyond dispute. Oh gracious, ever-faithful, all-consoling work! What tribute can be too lavish, what gratitude too profound for thee? This, at anyrate, was the decision Mary Stapleton came to as she sat in that publisher's room, surrounded by every known example of literary labour, from humble pamphlet to tree-calf tome. Who will deny the justice of her eulogy?

Mary was roused from her reverie by the request that she would walk upstairs. This she did at once by means of a spiral staircase, which made her rather giddy.

'Pray be seated, Mrs Stapleton. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. Your article was excellent—well-timed, original, and incisive. May I ask if it was a first attempt?'

Could this pleasant-spoken young man, with the pale, barrister-like face and mutton-chop whiskers—Madame Joubert would have called them *élégants*—really be the editor of *Scrivener's Bi-Monthly*? Mary had pictured an altogether different personage, grey-haired and formidable, whose mildest utterance made

the most intrepid contributor quail. As the gentleman sat at a huge desk, littered with manuscripts and slips of all sorts, she supposed he must be her nice, appreciative friend. It is true there was another person in the room, but he sat apart, writing—no doubt some confidential clerk. Whoever he was, his presence was disconcerting. For he conveyed an impression that he was taking the conversation down in shorthand—a suspicion scarcely calculated to put anybody at their ease.

‘Yes, except for a few girlish effusions, it is my first completed trial,’ Mary answered. (She did not think it necessary to allude to her previous acquaintance with the professor. She wanted that recollection to die out altogether.)

‘Then, I may say, it is a performance to be proud of. I see you have carried out your idea quickly. I imagine you have found this rather dry work after the other?’

Mary shrugged her shoulders with that inimitable assumption of indifference of which she was mistress.

‘No. I am used to translating, and have mastered the peculiarities of the French language thoroughly. You see, little imagination was needed, which made the thing so much easier. Simply a faithful likeness, avoiding too literal a style; in a word, something more than a mere transcript. This I hope to have done satisfactorily, with the aid of my Littré. I have written with an object. If people find my contentions dull, I am sorry.’

‘That is unlikely, unless your hand has suddenly lost its cunning. This will go to Paris to-night. I have already sounded Plon, and we may fairly reckon on his taking it, after the stir you have already raised. If

he accepts, perhaps you would prefer a sum down rather than enter into any contingent arrangement?’

Could Mary believe her senses? She who would willingly have made over her manuscript for nothing, so long as it got published and reached the quarter she wished, was actually discussing terms, as if she were a writer of established reputation. Yet she had heard that these men were hard task-masters! It was very wonderful and gratifying. She felt quite a choking sensation, and nearly broke down.

‘I should be content to leave myself entirely in your hands. You have been so very kind and liberal in your dealings with me that I feel I should be safe.’ (If an editor could by any possibility indulge in such a weakness as susceptibility, here surely was an excuse for a slight attack.)

‘So be it, then. You may expect to hear from us shortly. May I inquire, Mrs Stapleton, what are your ideas for the future in this line? Yours is far too active a brain to lie fallow for long. It wouldn’t be just to the public, you know,’ the gentleman concluded gallantly.

‘I have made my plans,’ Mary replied, with kindling enthusiasm. ‘There is a lovely spot in Brittany, which I visited last autumn, whose beauties have quite enchanted me. It would be a thousand pities not to try and turn its natural charms to account. The locality teems with romance, quaintness, and old-world associations. The place is photographed on my brain. I have already sketched out my plot. You see, I love that coast dearly. Chiefly because my eyes were opened there, and I was saved from committing a grievous sin against my fellow-creatures.’

‘Indeed? How so, may I ask?’

‘I must not tell. But it is all past and done with

now. You cannot conceive what queer characters I met out there. I must annex some of them for use, without giving offence, of course. You may know this place, perhaps—Roussoff, in Western Brittany?’

The editor shook his head. With a sigh—editors can sigh sometimes—he observed that, unfortunately, holidays and he had of late been strangers. When he could get away for a few days, he spent his time in fishing.

‘We must be always slaughtering something, Mrs Stapleton,’ the gentleman with the *élégants* said, with a smile, ‘although, believe me, we are not such heartless people as sometimes painted. Of course these rejected ones’—indicating a mass of manuscripts ready for the post—‘will vote me positively brutal. But, I assure you, there is no merit in a single contribution; acceptance would even imperil the standing of our magazine. But that fact is not easy to bring home to the respective authors. Nor can we readily make them believe that we are only cruel to be kind.’

‘That I can easily understand. But it must be hard indeed to bear rejection resignedly,’ Mary replied in tones sad and sympathetic. ‘For example, there is a very dear friend of mine, who writes such pretty stories, absolutely pure and wholesome, as her own nature is, yet she has never had a single one accepted. Now that does seem hard. I suppose there is just that something absent from them—style, grip of method, inability to catch the public taste—which is fatal. She feels the disappointment most keenly, I assure you. I would give worlds to help her.’

‘Ours is a field open to all. Why not send the lady to us to try her luck?’

‘You really mean it? How rejoiced she would be. She has never written a sentence but what is elevating.’

It was on the tip of the man's tongue to say that, as tastes went, perhaps Miss Wodehouse's productions would have fared better had she been less conscientious, pocketing her sentiments, and going in for something spicy. But in the presence of this good woman, such hackneyed advice seemed next door to an insult. There was something altogether superior about her which commanded respect. He checked himself, repeating that he would be pleased to receive any friend of his visitor's when she might favour him with a call.

Mary thanked him⁴ warmly, and rose to leave.

'It would be a kindly act. Miss Wodehouse, and her sister, who has a glorious voice and thinks of going on the concert-stage, have been so courageous under many difficulties. For myself, I owe them more than I can ever hope to repay—loving sympathy, protection, a home in time of need. What service I could ever render can wipe out such a debt? But I must not waste your time further. Once more, please accept my best thanks, especially for anything you may be able to do for "our little Nora," as she is called.'

'That is no ordinary woman, nor has hers been a common history. She has suffered also, and pluckily. It will be odd to me if she does not make her mark,' the editor said to himself as he resumed his censorship.

'What a clever, delightful young man, not the least like what I fancied he would be,' thought Mary, as she hurried away to the lawyer's.

She felt quite happy, longing for somebody to share her joy. Is it not often the case that half the pleasure of appreciation is robbed from us for want of a confidante? Mary was inclined to take the old crossing-

sweeper, who bowed so obsequiously, into her confidence, but supposed her conduct might be considered eccentric.

The interview at the publisher's was the pleasant experience of Mary's outing. The reverse was found at the dingy office in Lincoln's Inn, where dusty deed-boxes and dustier documents spoke forcibly of the law, its wranglings and delays. Mary breathed more freely when she left that atmosphere, in which the dark moments of her life were dragged once more ruthlessly into the light, apparently with no consideration or pity for her position. Still, without this torture, there could be no release. Of course she dwelt only on the brighter side of the picture when telling the sisters her adventures. It is needless to say with what intense interest Nora listened to every word. Following closely upon the first communication came this priceless invitation to actually wait upon the editor of a well-known periodical. It would have been incredible but that their own Mary announced the fact from her truthful lips. She must busy herself at once to produce something worthy so golden an opportunity, something brilliant, something powerful, as their friend's late achievement had been. To wait upon such a gentleman with what, at most, could be called 'a pretty story,' such as her friends were kind enough to say 'Katie's Temptation' was, would never do.

'Was it not all delicious? Now the ice is broken, there is no knowing what may happen. We may even induce my admirer to interest himself in your cousin's poetry. I declare it is raining good-fortune to-day.'

'I am so astonished, Mary, that you have been able to develop this satirical method, which has found such

favour with the public. Do you know, I should have thought you the last person capable of being cutting,' Nora gave out, after a pause, in her deliberate, old-fashioned manner.

'Would you indeed, Miss Prim?' broke in Shirley. 'That's because you didn't know her at the Academy. Mary was always getting into hot water for her sharp answers, especially with Fräulein. I knew she could come out strong, if necessary.'

'Yes,' laughed Mary, 'Shirley is quite right. There is a latent fund of sarcasm about me which is quite alarming. But, then, you must remember, I was goaded to desperation by that professor's cool insolence and hypocrisy. I can be funny, too—in print; don't forget that in my favour.

'Yes, there is humour also peeping out, which comes as a welcome relief,' continued Nora. 'Do not think me unappreciative, but I had rather your essay had been written throughout in a kindlier—may I say?—more Christian-like strain.'

'And proved a dismal failure? No, I have seen a little more of the world than you, my simple Nora, and know that mine was the only sure plan for meeting such shameless heresies. Had I been mild, I should have missed my mark altogether. "Lash for lash" was my motto. I am uplifted enough to consider it was, under the circumstances, a worthy one to fight under. Still, I know my style is peculiar, like its owner. I'll try and retrieve my character when I come to write about my favourite Roussoff—you'll find I cannot say complimentary things enough then. Its very primitiveness would disarm the most confirmed satirist. We must transport ourselves over there bodily next summer. When we shall all be so rich,

England won't be able to hold us. I have a special call in that direction. Now, to work, good people; mind I shall expect you to show a splendid record when we meet at tea-time. We ought all to feel inspired to-day, I am sure.'

Strangely enough, try as she might, Nora could not readily hit upon a subject, in her opinion, worthy to be submitted to the editor of *Scrivener's*. Her thoughts would keep dwelling upon Mary Stapleton's history, until gradually the notion took her that perhaps, after all, she might venture to use it as a framework. What she knew of the story was so eminently dramatic, and, with thought and study, might be made so interesting, that the temptation was great indeed to go at once to Mary's room (where she always wrote) and seek the requisite permission, without which, she had persuaded herself, it would be dishonourable, not to say deceitful, to act.

What a fascinating notion it was, making little Nora quite tremble with excitement at the possibility of its realisation. Clothed in judicious disguise, a narrative abounding with incident, above all, carrying a most instructive lesson, might be produced for the benefit of mankind. Nora's chief fear was lest her hand might not be strong enough for so remarkable a theme. Unless absolutely certain on this point, she would not touch it, be the disappointment ever so severe. Perhaps, unwisely, she could still never accept help from others, preferring to stand or fall alone by her writings. However regrettable this decision might be, it certainly showed a fine independence. Quite recently she had elaborated her method of treating Mary's concerns, and a touching record she considered they ought to make. On the only occasion she had spoken

to her proposed heroine about herself, Nora persistently foretold Mr Stapleton's ultimate reform, with reunion, and consequent happiness, at no distant date. It is true she had been somewhat startled, not to say nonplussed, at Mary's determined 'Never!' followed by an affecting apology for such ingratitude towards 'sweet, lovable little Nora.' How distinctly she recalled the pitiful tones in which Mary had given her reasons why it could 'never, never be.' But she had held her own all the same, determined to take a sanguine view of the oppressed wife's future. The more she thought of it, the more she felt convinced that everything would come right in time. Nora liked carrying her rule of making all her stories end happily into real life, which was a plan, if sanguine, at any-rate kindly. Had it rested with her, indeed, human misery would have been reduced to a minimum.

What should she do? Mary, when at work, disliked interruption exceedingly. But with so urgent an appeal to make, Nora thought she might just for once disobey orders. Yes, she would, whilst the glow of inspiration was full upon her. So she crept softly up to Mary Stapleton's room, and listened for a chance, when the busy pen halted, to go in and plead her cause. Nora, feeling very nervous, rapped on the door where her cousin Neil had once invited a reply from the preoccupied Mr Hossack. As on that occasion, no answer was given. Nora was far too timid to advance without permission.

Stay! Surely that was not a moan as of one in distress? The listener strained her ears. Oh dear, somebody really was crying inside there; what could be happening? Of course it was not their Mary, for she had never been in better spirits than when she had

left them ; quite bonny, as Shirley aptly put it. How very fortunate that she should have come when she might be of assistance. Then, of a sudden, a dreadful suspicion seized her. What if the presence which they felt instinctively was always hovering over their dwelling had assumed reality, and was about to force her from them? Well, if that calamity were impending, they should see of what stuff weakly Nora Wodehouse was made when it came to the pinch. If bodily strength were denied her, she possessed at any-rate a firm will, fortified in the present instance by the conviction that she had moral right on her side, let it be opposed by all the powers of legal coercion in the kingdom. She would stand in the breach, and try to save a harried lady from further persecution. Best hope of all. She might reach this offender's better nature—Nora firmly believed there is some good in all of us, if it can only be got at—be the means of effecting that reconciliation which must, sooner or later, take place. Emboldened by that felicitous thought, Nora pushed open the door and entered.

But there was no one in the room except Mary Stapleton. And what a sad state the poor thing seemed to be in. Instead of the diligent worker she had expected, Nora found a stricken woman on her knees, bowed down by sorrow, sobbing piteously. Her face was hidden in her hands, and over neck and shoulders fell the tresses which a short hour before had crowned her shapely head. Obviously a meeting had taken place. Mary had begged for a few minutes alone for prayer and self-communing, doubtless to write some farewell words to those she loved. This wicked husband would return presently and take his prize away. That, little Nora decided, was what had

happened. Again she thought how providential her visit was. Not a moment must be lost over sentimentalities. Promptitude, steadiness of resolve, those were required in the present emergency. It was not the first time they had been united in that slender person. Mary must be saved in this her affliction, Nora Wodehouse was obviously the medium chosen for the purpose.

She moved across to the bedside, where the woman knelt, and laid a hand tenderly upon her shoulder.

‘You must not give way, dear Mary, whatever may have occurred,’ came the soft, earnest tones; ‘for all will be right in God’s good time. Let us sit down here, and you shall tell me what has happened—quickly, but quite quietly. What you confide to me I will keep sacred to myself. I am a capital one at guarding secrets, you know.’

‘Nora! Oh, how did you get here?’ cried Mary, pushing back her hair, and peering into the pale face with a searching look which would have disconcerted a less strong-minded visitor. ‘Leave me at once. This is no place for you. Fool that I was not to fasten the door. Am I to have no moment’s peace in this most wretched world—poor, haunted creature that I am? Leave me, I tell you—go!’

She raised her clenched fingers over the small frame, as if she would have crushed it with a blow. But Nora did not wince.

‘You are not quite yourself this afternoon,’ she said very calmly. ‘Suppose I fetch you some sal-volatile? Not now? Well, presently perhaps? You know, Mary, I am your true friend, so you must be very frank with me, that I may help you. Has he left you long?’

'It is two years or more since I ran away from my husband, if that is what you mean. I have told you so already; why do you irritate me with such questions? To me it is a century of long-drawn torture and humiliation. Have you come here to mock me? Is not this reminder of his existence enough?' (She pointed to an open letter on her toilet-table.) 'Is there no chivalry, no honour, in this wretched land, that I must be chained for life to a drunken brute, a bully, a—libertine? God, where does probation end, and rest begin? When love is changed to hate, surely the most revengeful must be satisfied? Human endurance cannot hold out much longer.'

'I know it must all have been dreadfully hard to bear, love. But you have been so brave and patient, that to give way now is weak—quite unlike yourself. Besides, there is a happy ending in store. I am convinced of it. I was not referring to your original estrangement, but to this afternoon's visit. Your husband has been here, has he not? Remember, I am your sincere friend, so desirous to help.'

Mary's hollow eyes were again turned towards her who was thus unconsciously torturing her.

'What are you talking about, you odd little mortal? Do you think I would admit so vile a wretch under this roof? I should die of shame.'

'I fear, if he found you, nothing could prevent his coming. You see, he has the law on his side.'

Mary repeated the words with a scornful emphasis which pained Nora deeply.

'Yes, you are right. It is well I should be reminded of my fetters now and then.' She snatched up the note, and continued wildly, 'You are fond of writing books, are you not? Simple, goody-goody

stories for the young, harmless enough, clothed with a certain graceful fancy, but sadly lacking in backbone? Now, suppose I made you a present of these lines, the key-note of a plot that would thrill your readers through and through, save you no end of mental castigation—such a pivot to work upon as you can never have imagined in your most inspired moments—what if I generously made that priceless piece of paper over to you—would not that be nice of me? A truthful story of wrong, insult and wretchedness, such as the world has seldom heard. Why, it would make you famous at one bound, with every publisher at your feet praying for copy.'

This was indeed dreadful. What could have happened to change sweet Mary Stapleton into so wild a creature. Nora did not feel the unkind, satirical speeches about her writings, because she knew the speaker was upset that afternoon. As soon as she could be coaxed back into a rational state, she knew that, if she remembered what she had done, she would be overwhelmed with regret. It was obvious she had received some severe mental shock. It had fallen upon her at a time when her brain was very actively employed; the wrench from the dreamland in which she dwelt—Nora knew this attractive Brittany was a perpetual realm of fancy for her—had been sufficiently rude to affect for a while the balance of her well-ordered mind. Doubtless this letter was the cause. In some way it must have brought back to Mary (probably with unfeeling bluntness) the equivocal conditions under which she lived, the constant strain upon her by reason of her husband's misconduct. That was the construction Nora put upon the affair. She must, therefore, be extremely kind and forbearing to-

wards one they considered their guest, and were bound by all the laws of hospitality to protect. She wished Shirley had not been out at her lessons, for she was so clever at comforting people. Perhaps, though, on second thoughts, it was well her sister was not at home. She was excitable, and might also have given way, and, with the best intentions, Nora did not feel quite equal to the double responsibility so much consolation would necessarily have involved.

Well, it was a great relief to be told that Mr Stapleton had not called at Prospect Cottage after all. Nora would have more leisure to consider the gravity of events, and lay her plans accordingly. Was it a case for summoning the doctor, she wondered? Or would the excitement pass over presently, when the usual calm judgment reasserted itself? Concerning that, the little woman sat there and pondered with a very wistful, pensive expression on her face. Her hand rested on Mary's bowed head, for after that distressing speech she had fallen upon her knees again.

And under the pure, gentle touch, the woman's good angel came back to her. Reaction set in, and Mary again saw everything clearly. As she lifted her face to Nora, who waited there so patiently, the wild, despairing look gave way to one of deepest contrition. Still kneeling, she drew herself towards her companion.

'What can I do or say to excuse my base ingratitude? Oh, little Nora, little Nora, how wicked I have been! Can you ever forgive me?'

'I have nothing to forgive, dear Mary; pray do not kneel to me. Anything apparently unkind you may have said, under the influence of extreme agitation—which you must tell me about presently—is already forgotten, because I know you did not mean it; that

you are not quite in your usual spirits this afternoon. Indeed, your criticisms on my humble literary attempts were fully deserved. I must endeavour to profit by them. No one is more alive to my shortcomings than I am.'

'No, they are lovely. I was an unfeeling wretch. Compared with my miserable sneers and sarcasms, they are as earth to Heaven, purity to dross. It is I who must amend my style from your healthier example.'

'It is the lack of power which is fatal to so much I have done,' Nora replied, with a sigh. 'But we will not talk longer on the subject. In fact it would be most ungrateful of me to complain after the bright encouragement received this morning. Rather let me hear all about yourself, and what it is which has troubled you. You would laugh if I told you what my errand was, at the risk of incurring your displeasure. Oddly enough, you have made my wishes easier by broaching the very subject I wished to mention.'

'Really? How curious. Ah, I see now—'

'Yes, but I have decided not to worry you any more to-day. If I am courageous enough, I will call again to-morrow. You might like to lie down for a while?'

Mary kissed Nora's smooth forehead.

'You will stay where you are, please, considerate one, and listen to me. Good people are scarce. I cannot afford to lose your company.' She stopped, and Nora feared from her look that she was going to be upset again. 'Am I to send my guardian angel away, who has stepped in to save a cowardly woman from her gloomy Past? When she is near me, I am safe from—worst enemy of all—myself, and the promptings of my rebellious heart. Do not leave me yet, love.'

The appeal was very touching. It tried Nora's firmness to the full.

'I will remain joyfully, if I can be of any service. Suppose we sit at your writing-desk. You shall show me the original manuscript of your famous article in *Scrivener's*. Do you know, I am already beginning to feel nervous about that matter. Is it not foolish of me? Is this barrister-looking gentleman with the dark whiskers so very learned and critical?'

'Not when people offer him a tale where the record of an ungenerous Fate is told with such unerring Truth and Force as in this one. Miss Nora Wodehouse will find the door wide open for a story of that description. Now, I know your views as to plagiarism, and how conscientious you are, so I am not going to write down a single word. All you have to do is to keep those tiny ears of yours wide open, and listen with all your might. You must bear with me if I break down during the telling. And if I cry sometimes, do not check the tears. For it is God who sends them to me.'

'It is extremely kind of you, but I should be grieved beyond measure if the narration caused you pain,' cried Nora, with flushed cheeks. 'Would not to-morrow be better, when—'

'I am rather less of a virago, you would say? Certainly not. To-morrow never comes. I am a firm believer in present opportunities. You need not be in the least alarmed. I shall be quite rational this time. Are you ready?'

Nora settled herself, all attention, for here, indeed, was promised a game of 'Plots' worth listening to. Nothing ever produced at the 'Golden Eagle' could be named in the same breath.

Mary sat upon the bed and crossed her arms.

‘It will not be such a long story, after all. For I shall skip a good deal of what you know already. A few incidents I shall leave it to your imagination to fill in: that is the art of story-telling, as I need not remind you. What a splendid lesson will be taught! I wonder who is to be pitied most. The victim of this hasty marriage, where prudence was blinded by affection and foolish trust, or the slave of Vice and Selfishness? Little Nora shall decide presently.’

‘You must endeavour not to be harsh, Mary, dear,’ murmured the girl. ‘You quite trouble me when you get into that state. If you could see your way to forgive, how happy I should be.’

‘Forgive! Do you think I have not tried? But there are some injuries which cut too deep even for that. Help me with your prayers. Heaven knows, I am not vindictive.’

‘Far from it; you are forbearance itself. I pray night and morning for your further strengthening in this most Christian virtue. Shirley shall join me.’

‘I am going to ask you rather a strange favour,’ Mary said, after a pause. Her voice shook with emotion. ‘When you hear what I have to tell about myself and my wrongs, say anything, do anything—condemn me, chide me, if you will—but do not speak kindly. It is a weakness of mine that a few tender words sometimes unnerve me more than a storm of accusations.’

‘I understand perfectly; I will respect your wishes,’ was Nora’s gentle answer. ‘It is not unlike the treatment recommended for hysteria in those practical “Hints in Emergencies.”’

‘Precisely, wise Nora. Now, we will get to business.’

Mary Stapleton was careful, when giving the outline of her life's misfortune, to relieve its sadness by lighter touches, often humorous. She found, especially in her eccentric American friend and Madaine Joubert (who admired the English so much), subjects to provoke an occasional smile on the grave face of her listener. She also dwelt at length upon the fascinations of Roussoff—'a veritable Paradise for a romantic person like myself,' she explained—with its quaint sights and people.

'If anybody had told me a year ago such a place existed, I should have disbelieved the statement. No one who has not visited that out-of-the-way corner can possibly realise its beauties. Historian, naturalist, painter, student of men and manners, the aimless loungeur, may find the richest field for observation. For those who worship the sea, as I do, a treat indeed is in store. Its glories are simply indescribable.

'I have watched my love in most of its moods, sweet one. As it lay calm and drowsy, in emerald sheen, under a blazing sun, with only a ripple now and again to show it was not really '*morte*,' as French people are so fond of saying. Then roused by the wind into a perfect demon of fury and havoc. Which temper do I like best, you ask? Well, you know, I am so changeable myself, that is a difficult question to answer satisfactorily. But once during my stay I loved it most dearly. When it spoke to me as in the old days, which will never, never come back. When I heard my lost mother's voice whispering, from under the crested waves, grand words of warning and advice; just reproaches, also, which humbled my stubbornness, and sent a thrill of tardy repentance through my veins. How that picture is for ever burnt into my memory.

Surely, as the turning point of a new and worthier career, it should remain there, blessed and sacred, as long as brain and body hold together. I am overwhelmed when I think of the state into which I was drifting, when that sacred voice was sent again to save one so utterly alone, her wretched existence on the very verge of sin. Who would not dwell with lasting gratitude upon that hour of rescue?’

Then Mary told of the many curious habits and superstitions of these Roussovites. Of their daily round of toil and tillage, their customs, their peculiarities. How shabbily they were dressed during the week, and how smart was their attire on Sundays. Of the women in those wonderful caps (some resembling the tail of a lobster), worked bodices, and skirts which allowed a profuse display of ankle. They wore coquettish little shawls also, with brooches stuck in behind, which certainly spoke well for the honesty of the bystanders. Of the men, with their Eton jackets, blue scarves about their waists, broad-brimmed hats, with ribbons fastened by buckles; some dressed in ‘white ducks,’ like poor Mr Edward Foster used to wear, and which Nora thought was quite an obsolete fashion. She heard how the sea there held absolute dominion over everything and everybody. Giving the inhabitants food, employment, vigour, as it bronzed their cheeks and softened the colours in their eyes. Without that kindly neighbour, Roussoff, with all its fertility, must have starved. For did it not bring commerce to its doors, chiefly from their respected allies the Welsh? If other nations robbed the land of its produce, the natives got a tangible recompense, money, cheering many a thrifty home during the dull winter months. True, it was an enemy sometimes. When

in unceasing restlessness it broke through natural bounds, and tore away strips of that rich land, or thundered up the reach, doing violence alike to craft and tackle—the worn, scarred rocks bore witness to that mood only too clearly. Cruellest blow of all to wife or kindred, many a hardy Breton had been claimed as tribute by the turbulent waters, to find his last resting-place within that cemetery whose mounds were no strangers to the salt sea spray. Yes, the mighty ocean was at once an enemy and a friend to Finistère. Still, in Mary's opinion, a great deal more of a friend than an enemy.

Nor did the dwellers at Roussoff escape their burthens of sorrow. Nora heard that a sad, almost downtrodden, look was written on most of their faces, especially those who came from the barren island of Batz. This had puzzled Mary considerably at first, because they would seem to possess most things tending to make life enviable. When she came to study them closer, she decided it must be the result of cramped possibilities: those very qualities which made them in much so primitive and pleasant proved that incontestably. Perhaps some of the sadness—at least amongst the females—was caused by one distressing fact, which soon forced itself upon an observant woman's notice. That curse of nations—Drink—fell savagely upon this interesting race. It was pardonable to hope that its degrading hand might not have pressed so heavily there. Alas, it was not to be. The fatal propensity seemed as deeply rooted in its people as was their religion, paradoxical as it may appear. Certainly great temptation to over-indulgence was placed in the way of the weak-minded. For nearly every other house in Roussoff was a dram-

shop, with its poison label over the porch. And the stuff was so cheap that the poorest could, unhappily, exceed his cravings for a few sous. This was very deplorable, and had caused Mary many a heartache. The picture would also have had its ludicrous side but for the seriousness of the subject. For, even in their cups, these Roussovites preserved a singular courtesy and reverence—or was it superstition?—for their Mother-Church. With her own eyes Mary had seen stumbling groups doff their hats politely to that incongruously built edifice as the halting chorus suddenly ceased. Linked arm-in-arm, they would pass by in silence, only to resume their bawlings when the High Street and its treacherous cobbles was reached. As a matter of fact, incredible though it be, these Bretons did not consider drunkenness a Vice at all, only a sort of inherited licence readily excusable. Indeed, through her priesthood, the Church condoned the weakness, no doubt finding opposition thereto a hopeless crusade. Perhaps this was why an instinctive salute was unhesitatingly accorded so indulgent a Patron. Honest, sincere, endowed with many virtues, it was in truth a grievous blot. Its existence caused Mary infinite distress—had she not an awful instance of the curse always before her? Earnestly had she striven, during her visit, to solve the perplexing problem of reform, and however disproportionate to her wishes the result may have been, a few had reason to bless the day when Mary Stapleton came to Roussoff. Nor did she mean to rest contented with what she had done. Her pen should take up the exhaustless theme afresh, with all the energy and force of which she was capable.

‘Yes,’ sighed Mary, ‘that was the only unhappy

experience of my visit. My vivacious hostess helped me with her usual good-nature. But I could never quite make her understand the seriousness of the question. She seemed to expect to win over converts by the mere assertion that it was her English guest who wished them to give up their evil habits. But, as everybody who has tried must know, such a battle is not won so easily. To me the struggle seems to have only just commenced.'

'It is a very noble effort, dear Mary, and does you infinite credit. In my small way, I have also endeavoured to bring their shortcomings home to some of the rougher classes who frequent this neighbourhood (such as the haymakers and those thoughtless donkey-boys), with as yet, I fear, but indifferent results. I am now trying the tract system, so strongly advocated by the Misses Turnbull.'

'Well, you must persevere, Nora, though I confess I am not an implicit believer in tracts for the uneducated masses. My notion rather is to appeal to them by more practical means, with, in more stubborn instances, a wholesome insistence on the fear of after consequences if they neglect my advice. Desperate cases require desperate remedies, you know. But I am digressing terribly.'

After that, Mary resumed her disclosures with much directness. She neither spared nor exonerated herself, giving Nora the plain facts of certainly as harrowing a story as the most long-suffering mortal could be expected to bear. She wanted her clear-headed, discerning auditor to form an unbiassed opinion on her conduct under exceptional circumstances. Therefore she dwelt in detail over those days in Paris when she fell under a thralldom she

could not even now look back upon without a shudder—those hours when the tempter, by his agent, had so nearly gained his end. Mary knelt once more (as if for protection from his wiles) beside that little body, so invulnerable in her armour of rectitude. ❀

‘Will you hate or pity me most when you hear that week after week no prayer passed my lips, either in my chamber or God’s House? It seemed as if the first touch of that loathsome book perverted my very being—ruined my self-respect. I became absorbed, fascinated, filled with all kinds of unhealthy longings and conjectures. Abstruse subjects, far better left alone, filled my thoughts. Speculations as to the probability of a future state, arguments why this man’s creeds should not be embraced forthwith; why I should not join that throng of his followers who so wisely grasped life’s pleasures whilst it could. Sweet Nora, I know now that this was the first sting of Doubt, and loss of Faith, from the misery of which I pray you may be spared. At the bare remembrance of my frailty, I hide my face in shame.’

‘Look up, Mary dear. God was with you through that time of probation, although you heard Him not. It is often His will to chasten us in this way. Dwell rather upon His Mercy, when He called you back to Him, beside those rippling waves. The joy of re-awakening to your real and better self must have been blissful indeed. Now He is making you His Instrument for bringing light again to many a deadened heart in danger of falling into Unbelief. What more blessed choice than that?’

‘Do I not feel it, Nora? It is He who has guided and strengthened my pen. I deserve small praise, in truth. If tears can avail, my repentance is secured.’

'You blame yourself too much,' Nora resumed tenderly. 'We are all human; only too prone to go astray. In much you have been far braver than the rest. Before the terrible vicissitudes of your life, an angel might have fallen. When you are quite yourself again, you will see it all as I do. Remember—no cross, no crown.'

Mary Stapleton rose to her feet, and sank wearily into a chair.

'I know that, love. You are always ready with brightest comfort and encouragement.' Then she went on, after a pause: 'Nora, you regretted my cynicism and apparent uncharitableness this morning. Can you now wonder at them, acquired as they were in such a school? The state into which I fell allowed me only to look upon the dark side of my lot—the bitter spectacle of a wrecked and blighted being. Dinned into my ears, again, with maddening persistence, was the echo of my wrongs, which I had come out there to forget. How another's baseness had brought me into this dilemma, killing all love, happiness, and well-nigh hope. Distrust of any good motives in others, contempt for the teachings of my youth, a growing disbelief in human nature, cravings after revenge—this was the rebellion roused within my breast. I became warped, disappointed, reckless. Oh, Nora child, what more awful condition than that! Think how I had worshipped that man—what I have borne for his sake—how the best years of my life have been spoilt. Yes, Love is dead—irretrievably dead. Darling, can you understand what it is to be kept eternally on the rack—the wearing suspense, the ever-constant peril, one's days and nights an agony? Will you marvel how at length wounded pride came to my rescue, and made me take

the step I have? God knows, it was not until a long-enduring devotion had been worn out by unbearable neglect. Yet, in these few sentences of mingled threat and entreaty, I am exhorted to forget and condone! Never! This is the very climax of insult. A woman can endure much, but I have found the limit of such endurance. Tell me, if you can, pure, sensible Nora, that you think I am right in praying for deliverance from such a burthen.'

'You must have known that I think so from the first, from the fact of our—Shirley's and my own—countenance, even if we have not put our thoughts into words. Had we considered you were acting wrongly, it would have been our duty to try and convince you to that end. It is a cruel position into which you have been forced. I can see no other alternative than to act as you are doing. Dear Mary, it seems almost an impertinence for me to intrude in so delicate a matter, but it does grieve me to hear you say that you can never love again. That is such a dreadful thing. Dare I not hope that even now it is not too late to heal the wound? Or, failing that, perhaps you may meet someone who— Well, you must forgive me. I was thinking only of your happiness. How anyone can ever have treated you badly passes my comprehension altogether. We will not speak of this distressing affair any more, or you may make yourself ill. Look forward, therefore, to the brighter future, whatever it may have in store.'

'If you mean reconciliation between him and me, it is quite impossible. I have not told you all. I am given forty-eight hours to decide. If I do not go to him then, he will come here to claim his lawful wife, with this vaunted justice at his back. How he found

me out, I cannot conceive. I am absolutely resolved that no force on earth shall ever make me live with him again. You will never give me up, little Nora, will you? Surely they cannot drag me from such a house of Peace as this is, to share another hell with him. That would be too awful a fate. How I wish I had set these lawyers to work sooner.'

'Have we not proved our fidelity, dear—what is better still, our faith in you? Rest assured we will not desert you, come what may.'

'Heaven bless you for those words; they are the echo of your own sweet self.'

'Speaking of lawyers,' Nora continued, heedless of Mary's compliment, 'you must not mind my suggesting that, in respect of protection, it would be safer to leave yourself in their hands. I imagine your suit—petition, or whatever it may be called—is far enough advanced to give them that right. Indeed, I fancy to have read somewhere of a protection order being granted in similar instances, pending definite arrangements. Or is that something to do with bankruptcy? My knowledge of law is sadly deficient. Your case would surely justify some such provision.'

'If there is such a thing, I suppose the slowcoaches have got my affair sufficiently ready for it,' Mary answered, with a sigh. 'I only recognise the fact that I am bound, and ought to be free, unless justice is dead in the land. How the release is effected is immaterial. I sometimes think we still live in an age of slavery. I am going to ask you to let me put off the rest of my story until to-morrow, Nora. I fear, after all, I am rather unstrung to-day; that I had better have taken your advice. You have enough materials to commence upon.'

Little Nora shook her head.

‘It was heartless to have pressed you for them. Even if I felt myself qualified, I dare not touch so sad a history. Darling Mary, what must you not have suffered?’

‘Only God and myself know that. But the cause will be removed very soon now. This is the last straw. If he should put his threat into execution, you will see. Now, go away, please, pretty one, that I may think. When Shirley comes home, send her to me.’

There was a fond embrace, with more whispered words of comfort. Then Nora, pensive, but not discouraged, left Mary Stapleton, as bidden, to her solitude.

CHAPTER V.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

OFTEN when, in after years, Neil Challoner looked back upon the period spent in the uncongenial atmosphere of Achilles Passage, he marvelled how he could have borne the strain put upon him. Shirley had truly said that he was conscientious almost to a fault, holding duty before every consideration. Still the fact remained that, being a poet, with all a poet's lofty thoughts, few paths in life could have been more unsuited to his tastes. But for the affectionate encouragement received from his cousins and his faithful friend Robert Hossack, the position might have become intolerable. Happily those at Prospect Cottage exactly understood Neil's character, and did their utmost to reconcile him to accept the inevitable with resignation.

In his heart of hearts, however, Neil felt that it was impossible ever to expect to really ally himself with so money-worshipping a crew, in the midst of which all his days (and not a few of his nights) were passed: if that meant duty, then he sometimes thought it was asking too much sacrifice of him. His susceptibilities were shocked by the rude experiences of Messrs Sharp & Argent's office. As he grew older, and more accustomed to his work, the feeling that he was serving

his employers faithfully—an inborn pride in compelling himself to submit patiently to a distasteful lot—brought a certain consolation. He also steeled himself to bear a great deal, by contrasting his advantages with others he met. He knew there must be thousands in the city ground down to submission, as he was. Therefore, he must try to be contented and uncomplaining. It was not easy, because the wrench from dreamland, to the very embodiment of all that was unsentimental and commonplace, had been extremely violent. Had Neil Challoner been let down more easily to his present level—say through a course of the gentility of Lloyds, or by serving some nice, considerate firm of ship-brokers—perhaps the shock would not have been so severe. As it was, to ask a poet to step placidly from the regions of fancy into the turmoil of Stock Exchange dealings, without entering a mental protest at the irregularity, was rather too much to expect. Probably the business method at Messrs Sharp & Argent's differed very little from that of dozens of other firms in the neighbourhood. But to Neil it certainly seemed as if vulgarity, noise, and an unseemly struggle to be rich at any cost, were more than duly represented in that bustling alley. Of course he got fairly reconciled in time to a good deal. But to say that for the first few weeks he was bewildered, would be to but faintly indicate his condition. Even at that early stage of his career, he feared lest this dreadful city meant to be his bitterest enemy, robbing him of opportunities for study, stealing away his talents, possibly his health as well—a dismal outlook. Was it unnatural that he learnt to hate the place, or that sometimes a premature despair, akin to torture, oppressed him? It did seem hard to be driven to associate with persons apparently

so devoid of all appreciation or refinement. Still more unkind, that his energies should be sapped in this way by his very devotion. His trials began early, for in an evil moment Neil had confided to a companion the direction in which his inclinations pointed, even venturing to submit to his notice a few recent examples of versification. Needless to say, from that hour, the lad became the butt of those hilarious apprentices, who were also being initiated into the mysteries of the House under Messrs Sharp & Argent's guidance. As soon as Neil's bent became known—of course the news spread like wildfire—he was made the target of an amount of reckless chaff only intelligible to those who know Stock Exchange ways. One detestable epithet in particular, instantly fastened upon him by common consent. The new arrival was voted a Juggins of very pronounced type. There was an insulting ring about the expression which wounded Neil deeply, although he had not the remotest idea what it meant, and sought for the word in vain in his dictionary. A Juggins! Such a nickname exceeded the grandest achievements of a school-boy. How could anybody be expected to thrive in the city, or anywhere else, with such a dead weight of opprobrium tacked on to him? Neil did not escape many similar derisive distinctions in the future. But none ever stung or rankled so deeply as that crushing epithet of Juggins. To his credit be it said that, even under this extreme provocation, he bore no malice towards his tormentors, although he pitied their ignorance from the bottom of his heart, proving conclusively that he was a hero as well as a poet. By nature shy and reserved, the result of thus finding himself doomed to such surroundings tempted him to draw back into his shell more

than ever, whereby his days became little short of penitential. What an inestimable boon that he had always his cousin's love to support him ; to know that she believed in, trusted him, implicitly. Many a time, when he felt he must give way under the taunts of his assailants, the gnawings of a baulked ambition, the knowledge that this sustenance awaited him at their northern cottage, helped to cheer him through his labours, until the well-earned repose of evening came. Prosaic people, who think they know all about such matters, will probably laugh at Neil and his foolish fancy, as represented by Miss Nora Wodehouse. What could a boy like that understand about love—the unfathomable, boundless, mysterious? It was too monstrous a supposition. It would be idle to try and convince them how these two considered their mutual attachment so deep-rooted and lasting that nothing on earth could endanger it. Surely a romantic notion, finding scant favour in our practical age—one might as well expect such chits to explain Love's divine growth or constancy.

In the month when Neil entered upon his probation, markets were extremely lively, after a prolonged course of dulness. The boom in mines which so stimulated the patrons of Circe's Crib—not a hundred miles, as it happened, from Achilles Passage—had set in with marked virulence, to loosen the purse-strings of the investing public most acceptably for the brokers. Every day some glowing prospectus of the Rushworth type made its appearance in the daily papers. With singular promptitude the requisite capital for many undertakings was forthcoming. What a pity that Mr Wodehouse still found it necessary to sojourn upon the Continent: he might have been on the spot to

such advantage then, as his former chums were—temporarily. What a fine chance he missed, to be sure, with a nephew located with such a go-ahead firm as Sharp & Argent! What good things the young man could have put his uncle up to had he chosen. Such people possessed invaluable opportunities for information, with peeps behind the scenes of priceless value to the operator. And here he was expatriated, by forces beyond his control, with no more diversion than an occasional flutter with the Auteuil or Long-champs bookmakers to keep the old spirit alive within him. But those investments possessed the obvious drawback of being conducted on the ready-money principle, whether he backed favourites or outsiders, whereas those other outside ones could be dealt with, to the tune of thousands, under shelter of quite a modest cover. Yes, Henry would have lamented his chances had he known that his nephew was in the very thick of that entrancing district. But he did not know; he further persuaded himself that he did not care what had become of his relatives. So he had to rest content with watching the development of the boom, as chronicled in the money article of a successful American journal, whose chief had, after the collapse of the 'Pilot,' meanly pirated many of the ex-manager's pet improvements of the catch-penny order.

One result of the excitement was that it brought Neil Challoner a welcome respite from teasing. Most of the sportive clerks were too busy rushing about without their headgear, or engaged in those wonderful fractional calculations, to find leisure for even so seductive a pastime as baiting an inoffensive poet. Argent was, of course, in his glory during this season of booming—the type of a prosperous broker, from the

tip of his patent-leathers to the crown of his Christy. To Neil he was quite an enigma. Sometimes he almost liked the man, for, with all his aggressiveness and vulgarity, he was very open-handed.

Probably the newcomer, with his unintelligible shyness and reticence, was an equal puzzle to Mr Argent, if he ever troubled his head about him. Having taken Neil into his office without a premium, for the sake of Colonel Hoskyns, whose family had been clients of the old firm for years—had indeed bolstered it up once when hard-pressed—he felt it incumbent on him to bestow an occasional attention upon the quiet lad, who sat upon his stool checking contracts so patiently through the livelong day. But Mr Argent's time was far too valuable for any lengthened conversation with anybody who did not mean dealing. Had Neil ever made serious blunders—which happily he never did, though he disliked arithmetic exceedingly—no doubt he would have been promptly pounced upon, and upbraided in the half-captious, half-jocular vein which was Mr Argent's speciality.

'Can't make that boy out a bit,' the broker once said to Sharp, who was a much milder personage, quite leavening the Bohemianism of the office. (He it was who conducted timid old lady clients across to the Bank, on tame, unremunerative errands in connection with consols.) 'But he's plodding and correct, if not over bright. Wish he wasn't so precious sentimental, though. Writes verses, or some rubbish of that sort, don't he? Thought I saw him turning on the water-works on the sly the other day. That kind of thing won't do here, don't you know.'

'The young fellow's a favourite of mine,' Sharp answered. 'He has a taking face. Rather the round

peg in the square hole here, I fancy. I understand he helps to support his cousins with what money he's got. We must try and push him along,' which was a kindly speech of Mr Sharp's.

It was autumn when Neil first made acquaintance with Achilles Passage. Then came dreary winter, with its fogs and slush ; at last the long-looked-for genial spring, when the Hampstead lanes awoke to new life and cheerfulness.

Summer was the time of real joy to one who, worshipping Nature with intensest fervour, never tired of seeking her countless treasures. For just a few fleeting weeks Neil revelled in his morning and evening liberty. The weather was mostly glorious, when he would rise with the sun to catch the first freshness of the coming day. Amid leafy walks, or on the silent clumps, he dreamed away many an hour. How calm and restful was the landscape, dotted here and there with silent pools, to be invaded presently by bands of noisy urchins, armed with their primitive tackle for the capture of newt, stickleback or tadpole. Seated in some retired nook, lost in speculation as to the Unseen, noting Earth's marvels unfold themselves before his eyes, Neil seemed to be drawn closer to the secrets of the Inscrutable. The flimsy haze stealing slowly from off the hedgerows, the chirping of birds, the buzzing of myriads of insects, all the drowsy murmurings which heralded the birth of another day, soothed this young dreamer—strengthened his spirit for life's encounter, wherever he might be called upon to fight it. Instinctively his thoughts were led into the same groove as little Nora's had been. He also grieved that there could be those of his fellow-creatures who doubted the omniscience of God. Neil

longed to rouse the unbelievers from their slumbers—bid them come forth with him to accept these signs, with all their unanswerable Truth, as he did so faithfully. Why were people's hearts so wilfully dull and cold? What more convincing proof of their Maker's Presence could they have than this irrefutable argument of Nature herself calling aloud to them at their very gates? This grievous blindness threw a painful shadow over Neil's reflections—a shadow which lengthened gloomily as he remembered in how much the circumstances of his position restricted projects into which he would have thrown himself, body and soul, could he but have entered the Church, as he had once so proudly hoped he might. Well, notwithstanding all drawbacks, and the indignities to which he was subjected, he must strive to accomplish what he could in the smaller sphere open to him. It would be very cowardly to act otherwise just because he was disappointed in his career.

Still, as he sat thus on those golden mornings—his brow fanned by the soft breath of Heaven, refreshed and invigorated by all the buoyant influences of a scene rich in warmth, light and colour—how hopeless his future seemed. The dread certainty continued to overpower him that he could never follow those paths he was asked to with either profit or content: his inner self told him that with unmistakable honesty. In vain did he struggle with the conviction, as unworthy of one who had so much to be grateful for. He must persuade himself that all would come round happily in time, if he were only patient and painstaking. It was true he did not get any salary just then; but from a hint let drop by Mr Sharp—who, he fancied, understood him—there was every likeli-

hood of his getting some remuneration shortly. Neil quite blushed—or was it a tint from the sun's rays?—as he remembered how the remainder of his patrimony, after contributing his share to the Cottage expense fund, was swallowed up in numerous gifts to his cousins, with the laudable intention of making them feel their father's neglect less acutely. He did not take the least credit for any self-denial this might involve. If only out of respect to the memory of his Aunt Celia, to whose example and unselfish care he owed so much, he felt bound to help her daughters—a really chivalrous resolution when Neil's years are considered. Besides, was he not betrothed to the elder? It was therefore his undoubted right to supply her with sundry embellishments, that she might appear at her best before the little circle in which they moved. Nora's tastes in the matter of dress being simple, almost to the verge of austerity, Shirley's attempts 'to smarten Nollekins up' would have proved ineffectual but for Neil's generosity. He absolutely despised money for its own sake, though by no means blind to its value when properly applied. In the city its everlasting worship sickened him, so that he hated its very name. Had he not even, in his own short experience, seen how its abuse stirred up the worst qualities in human nature? Witness his Uncle Henry's degraded exile, unquestionably the result of gambling and intemperance, with the misery he had brought on innocent heads. Then the neglectful husband of this charming Mrs Stapleton, who, he felt certain, had also been obliged to run away for the same causes, although she never alluded to so painful a subject. Surely two such instances were enough to point a moral not easily gainsaid. To gamble on the Stock Exchange, Neil,

therefore, considered a sin. Although he had never been inside the House, or Hell as some people called it, Achilles Passage was close enough to catch the subdued roar of its members. A fascinating pastime it evidently was, from the number of operators who took the fever. To aid them directly or indirectly was an utterly repulsive notion to Neil Challoner. Thus was he held as in a vice. Bound, on the one hand, to his apprenticeship and duty; yet dying to rid himself of an obnoxious tie. Was ever youthful poet placed in so galling a situation?

To gain money in the peaceful pursuits of versification was another matter. Neil considered that to be a highly honourable course. But he could not satisfactorily follow it, because it was an admitted truism that no man could serve two masters — mistresses being also implied, he felt sure—the Goddess Gold in the persons of Messrs Sharp & Argent, the Muse as suggested by every throb of his ardent young pulse.

This, then, was the result of the dreamer's musings. If he were tempted sometimes to give way in uncontrollable resentment at what he considered so unkindly a dispensation of fortune, he atoned for his weakness by much serious thought and study of the art he endeavoured to shine in. Rarely, therefore, during this brief summer spell, when health and comparative leisure were vouchsafed him, was he without some treasured volume, upon whose rich store he feasted, or, pencil in hand, he strove to snatch some of Nature's beauties for his own.

And those delicious evenings when, under its slanting rays, Nora and he bade good-night to the sun until the morrow, roaming together in happy unity as they built their innocent castles in the air! What an

appreciative listener was this gentle cousin, as Neil unfolded to her many a project for hastening on his fame, or sought advice upon some knotty passage. What a clear, practical head she had, putting him right where his ardour might so often have led him into error. Neil was fully alive to his faults, to the fact that success was only to be reached by great self-denial and diligence. He was determined to curb his impetuosity, difficult though he sometimes found it. Nora supplied just that cool judgment which was wanted. When she said, 'Yes, it is very nice, Neil, dear, but do you not think the lines would be improved if—' and went on to criticise certain slips of rhythm, construction, or the like, with a gentle firmness, the young enthusiast felt what a treasure he had won.

Shirley always excused herself from these evening rambles, being highly discreet in such matters. She preferred to practise her songs over in the twilight, her sweet notes floating out through the open window, to the delight of the wayfarer. Afterwards, she would sit in their doll's garden, as she termed it, thinking of Mr Hossack. Why, he never called now; what sort of a place Mannteufel Street was, in particular the 'high-class pension' where he boarded; above all, what could have induced him to go and live in stuffy London at the very time Hampstead was so pleasant. How miserable she had felt when he left, the parting rendered infinitely worse because her love kept her tongue-tied just when she would have been most talkative! Had not somebody said that absence makes the heart grow fonder? In her case that was impossible. Still there was the gnawing pain of separation always present, which was a wretched thing to

have to bear, but must, nevertheless, be borne, and bravely too, as no doubt thousands of her sex had discovered.

‘Heigh-ho! I wonder when Mary will have finished?’ Shirley asked of herself one unusually sultry evening. ‘My love-birds ought to be home by this time. I hope it will not be as close as this to-morrow, for my first appearance on any platform. If so, I shall want something stronger than ginger-wine to sing upon— What was that noise? How silly I am to-night. Ah, Mary, dear, I am so glad you are come—I have been so dull without you.’

Perhaps it was well Shirley could not see her friend's face just then, for it was sad, with rims round the eyes which told of sleeplessness and tears. Mary had been working very hard of late. She had put her belief in the unfailing efficacy of her antidote fully to the test, throwing herself into the scenes and characters she depicted with nervous, almost harmful, energy. But the sorrow and the tears were not all the result of that; rather of the awakening to realities, the existence of those grim dangers which beset her at every turn. It was not for herself she feared. Having suffered so much, a little more distress could not possibly matter. But it grieved her sorely to think that her husband, having tracked her down, might at any moment darken the doors of Prospect Cottage with his detested presence. Mary well knew the state he would arrive in for such a meeting. How could she bear the disgrace of others seeing her once manly, handsome Francis grown coarse and brutal under the foul curse of drink? She knew the tricks and cunning of its votaries. How they can threaten, whine and fawn, as the mood takes them; how volubly promise reform, how ably plead

for condonation. Forgiveness, amendment! Yes, sovereign man must have it all his own way. Neglect, insult, persecution, all be forgotten at his supreme command. Is it not woman's province to put up with most things without a murmur—to forget and forgive instantly, only too grateful for the chance? Mary had heard of those of her sex so cowed and weak that they were ready to lower pride and self-respect at the mere beck of an erring man, when the request was flung to them with about as much courtesy as a bone might be to a dog. With what result? Misery more profound than before. Mary was not to be cajoled into attempting so doubtful an experiment as the conversion of a sinful husband by such abject means. Her broken life asked for no revenge or reparation. But it drew the line at so humiliating a state as that. Was a woman really to cling to her false helpmate through—everything? Had she not done more than most, pardoning, excusing, until the final crowning insult had been reached? As long as reason held out, she would pray for his rescue from evil ways, as she had done in the past. But return to him—she could never do that. Already her pride had been dragged sufficiently through the mire; over and over again she had shielded him with her tact, as only a woman can, from the consequences of his follies. Now her heart was steeled—persuaded that it ought not to be called upon for further sacrifice. It were idle to say that this constant tension had not told upon her. Her nerves were sadly unstrung. Every footstep she heard might be his; every croak of Miss Pridham's eccentric timepiece brought the threatened visit nearer. She was filled with morbid fears. Was pity so dead in this tardy, exacting Justice that it could keep a mortal woman

thus on the rack, when one stroke of its merciful sword could set her free?

And what if her health gave way under the strain? if the power to write failed her, as it had done before? Such a visitation would be dreadful indeed, for besides robbing her of the greatest pleasure she had, it must increase the load of indebtedness she was under, which the pen alone could cancel. God's mercy would surely spare her so terrible a chastisement.

Mary was anxious also about Shirley. She saw plainly that her friend had fallen in love, not with the mild curate of Saint Cyprian's, but with this Mr Hossack, who, from all accounts, was a perfect paragon. A paragon, indeed! One result of Mary's experiences was that her trust in man had been utterly shaken. She suspected the motives of all of them, as she knew them to be monuments of selfishness. Possibly good ones existed, but they must be very scarce. It was quite a shock to think that any man dare approach this innocent Shirley. She guarded her affection so jealously that such behaviour was magnified into almost an insult to herself. The possibility that the foolish Mr Hossack had never even told his love did not for a moment occur to her. In Mary's anxiety for the girl's welfare, Don Juan appeared a saint by comparison with this artful scribbler, who had surreptitiously tried to steal a young affection without the courage to come boldly forward. How dare he have presumed upon such treachery? It was certainly not conduct becoming a gentleman or a man of honour. Why, Shirley was pining away under their very eyes! The affair must be stopped at all hazards before further mischief was done. Mary would speak to her darling that very night. She would sooner see her in her

grave than the victim of what the world was so fond of calling 'an unfortunate love affair,' or have to encounter one tithe of the horrors her own married life had brought. Mary felt as if she could kill anyone base enough to cause Shirley one moment's unhappiness. Those disposed to resent her animosity must consider, in excuse, what she had endured before such feelings could be roused.

'You have been singing "Weary, weary heart," *méchante*, have you not?' was how Mary opened the attack.

'Yes, it is a favourite of mine. Miss Turnbull suggested the song for the programme to-morrow. But I thought it scarcely cheerful enough for a charity festival.'

'I should think not, indeed, if the chairman expects anything like a collection afterwards. Let me see, did I not hear you singing it one evening not long ago—the night I was in my room with a headache? It must have been the last time your literary friend, Mr—dear me, how stupid I am at remembering names—came to supper.'

'It is possible I may have done so. Mr Hossack often asked for the song when he lodged here.'

'Did he really? No doubt you favoured him?'

The light was treacherous, but Mary fancied she saw Shirley move impatiently, as if she would have fired up, as she sometimes did when chaffed about her admirers. On so light a provocation, of course, it could only mean one thing—that she was very far gone indeed as regarded Mr Hossack. Mary must strike, therefore, whilst the iron was hot.

'We had so many pleasant musical evenings then,' the girl answered, with averted head. 'It is rather

difficult to remember. Don't you think Nora and Neil should be back by this time?'

'I think it is shocking of them to keep such hours. But that is not to the point, Miss Prevarication. Now turn round and look me full in the face. If you were asked whether your Mary was sharp at detecting things going on under her nose, or only an unobservant creature, wrapped up in her bookmaking, what would you answer?'

'That she was the sweetest, cleverest—'

'Naturally. But you must not fly off at a tangent. To put the question more plainly. Suppose Mary saw a silly, grown-up goose, flattering herself she could deceive a woman of the world, who had learnt to read the bird's inner thoughts like an open page, which would be the most likely to hoodwink the other? That is what I want you to tell me.'

'I should say it would be impossible to deceive "Madame Traill."'

'You would? Even if the grown-up goose were Miss Shirley Wodehouse?'

'My dear Mary, what riddle are you asking? You are in a funny mood to-night. I do not think we need wait any longer for those two. Eliza has lighted the lamp.'

'We will give them another ten minutes. There will be plenty of time to guess the conundrum by then. Indeed, I think it is answered already? Look up, darling. You may trust me.'

'He is so noble and good. I could not help it,' Shirley murmured, more to the stars than to the discerning Mrs Stapleton. 'You won't breathe a syllable to anyone, will you? Of course, I am a noodle, and must get over it, as dozens of other geese have to. Once I fancied Nora had found me out, but she was

quite wrong. I thought it would have killed me when he told us he was going. It seemed as if something was torn from my very being. Just a few formal words, and he was gone! It was like some horrid dream, only when I woke I found all was true. If he had but stayed, I should have been so quiet and happy, even if he did not care one bit for me. Instead, I have been restless and miserable ever since.'

'I am very, very sorry, Shirley. But it is far better as it is. You will conquer the affair quicker, and soon learn to forget about him, as he will about you, although, no doubt, he promised eternal devotion and all the rest of it.'

'There you are quite wrong, Mary. He has never proposed — I mean, said one word of the sort. I have no reason to think that he cares for me more than any other young lady of his acquaintance. Indeed, I have tried to imagine what would happen if I heard he did. I have convinced myself that, provided I knew it was for his welfare, I could bear the disappointment bravely. Yes, I love him so dearly as that. There is no law to prevent it, is there?'

Her companion was not aware of any; its vagaries being quite beyond her comprehension. With Platonic affection, however, she had no patience whatever. To her notions, its logic was rotten at the core. It must be one thing or the other in matters of this kind: half-measures were dangerous, not to be countenanced for a moment. Shirley's spirit of originality and independence was certainly exemplified in her dealings with the tender passion. What a relief to find that the love might at present be only on one side! At anyrate no offer had been made, which was something to be fervently thankful for.

‘You have never seen Robert,’ Shirley continued, ‘or you would know that he is the soul of honour, quite incapable of promising anything he did not intend to fulfil. It is a strange thing’—she glanced anxiously round, for fear of listeners, as she touched her Mary’s arm—‘ever since he went, I have been haunted by a frightful suspicion lest somehow I was the cause of his leaving. I cannot explain the feeling, but there it is all the same.’

‘Then the sooner you knock it out of your giddy little pate the better. No doubt he got tired of this quiet dell—wanted more breathing-room. Authors feel like that occasionally, so if I run away you will guess the reason. If I were you, I should forget this ideal of yours as speedily as possible. There are few men worth thinking twice about, believe me.’

‘Oh, my dear, what are you saying! You cannot wish to pain me, I am sure? Why, nothing in this world could ever make me forget Robert—Mr Hossack, I should say. He is part of my life already, whatever happens. If I did not know that our Mary was really goodness itself, I might think her troubles had made her bitter. You must not imagine all men are bad, because—because one has treated you shamefully.’

Mary Stapleton sighed.

‘Perhaps I am growing bitter, hard as I have fought against the temptation. Darling, it is only from my great concern for your future that I dare speak as I have done. You must forgive anything unkind I may have said. It is all the result of my horrid selfishness. The bare notion of anybody stealing away your love fills me with inexpressible jealousy. If I could only be convinced that he is worthy of you!’ She pushed back Shirley’s locks, and kissed her

forehead tenderly as she continued, with a sad smile, 'You see, I have so few friends in the world, that I am extremely anxious to keep those I have.'

'Nothing could ever shake my deep affection for you, dear Mary, whatever came about,' answered the other, with emotion. 'You must always be quite sure of that. There is not much cause to be anxious at present. I am only a foolish creature, and must get over my infatuation, I suppose, as best I can. How I do wish I had been a man! I certainly was a tomboy once. Well, you have drawn my secret from me, though how you noticed anything is indeed a mystery. You will be awfully good, and say nothing about what you have discovered, won't you?'

'All you have told me is in strictest confidence; I give you my word. You innocent Shirley! Is it likely I should betray you? I am not quite such a wretch as that. Just one question more, then I am silent.'

Mary looked into her companion's honest blue eyes, as if she would have reached the very soul through them.

'Have you examined yourself thoroughly in this? Shirley, are you so convinced of Mr Hossack's worth that, need be, you could give yourself to him in perfect trust and faith?'

'God would not let me love Robert as I do, or keep him so constantly in my thoughts, were it otherwise, Mary. Any more than He would allow me to tell you a falsehood,' the girl replied softly, with truthful emphasis.

'That is enough. Now, run in quickly and compose yourself, for I hear footsteps.' To cover Shirley's retreat, she walked a pace or two forward. 'You

naughty truants! I suppose it is no use reminding you how long you have kept us hungry folk from our suppers?’

Next day was the all-eventful one. In the evening Shirley was to appear at the charity dinner, in no less a character than that of a public vocalist—a trying ordeal, as those who have undergone it will allow. Nobody could accuse the youngest Miss Wodehouse of timidity. But she felt decidedly nervous some hours before it was time to don the tarlatan, in which she was to make her first bow from a semi-professional platform. She was to do the thing in style, the Misses Turnbull having insisted on lending their brougham, in which old-fashioned vehicle she was to accomplish the perilous descent of the hill, under care of Dawes, the steady confidential retainer, who would then drive her to the tavern in Aldersgate Street. Eliza was to ride on the box, as bodyguard, duly provided with wraps, in case the night turned chilly, and smelling salts, lest her responsibility felt exhausted after the performance. It would be difficult to say whether mistress or maid were most excited when the carriage came round. Previously, Shirley held a sort of informal reception in the parlour. In her neat white dress, flowers from the Sycamore conservatory in hair and on bosom, a brand-new pair of gloves—the others were past reviving—her face aglow with anticipation, she certainly presented a charming type of English girlhood, in the fulness of youth and health. Miss Pridham, in particular, made no attempt to conceal her admiration.

‘Well, I do declare you look a perfect pictur, miss,’ was the dame’s decision, as she toddled round Shirley, taking her in exhaustively. ‘It’s lucky some of the young gentlemen hereabouts are not in the way, or

they'd be losing their hearts, as well as their heads, straight off—that civil-spoken Mr Ferguson, for example.' But at a warning glance from Nora the landlady retracted. 'However, that's neither here nor there. You might be almost dressed out for a Drawing-Room. Bless us, many a peep I've had at the quality shaking out their finery on the staircase. That was in the St James's Palace days, long before you were born or thought of, my dear. A friend of mine—she's dead and gone, poor soul—was nurse to one of the house-keepers. She'd ask me in to tea sometimes, and pleasant enough gatherings they were. Now, I'm told, the other Palace can scarce hold all the smart ladies. How times is changed to be sure! Look at the Opera. I've heard the great Jenny Lind in her prime, when people would take camp-stools and sandwiches with them, sitting for hours at the doors on the chance of ever so uncomfortable a seat. Maybe they'll do that to hear your sweet voice some of these fine days, though I'm afraid I shall n't be above ground to make one of them. Bustle up, Eliza, and see Miss Shirley wants for nothing. Take care to bring her back safe and sound. We shall all be on tip-toe to hear how the affair's gone off.'

With many good wishes for her success, to say nothing of injunctions from Nora to be most careful of herself and avoid taking cold, Shirley drove away.

Who shall describe her feelings when she drew up at that well-known hostelry where banquets innumerable—complimentary, charitable, masonic—take place nearly all the year round? The particular asylum whose festival was to be held that evening evidently did not lack supporters. For Shirley heard many names announced in stentorian tones, and caught

sight of the owners of them filing in to be presented to Mr Button, as she passed upstairs to the artistes' room—a distinction which made her feel 'quite an important personage already,' as she whispered gaily to her attendant. Almost before she knew where she was, Shirley found herself shaking hands with a fussy little man, with a bald head and an indifferent complexion. He promptly introduced himself as Mr Fountain Smythe, adding, 'whom possibly you may have heard of?'

'I do not remember having done so,' Shirley replied, with equal frankness, wondering who this could be. Perhaps the manager, or one of the butlers. 'You see, this is the first time I have been at an entertainment of this sort. Will you kindly tell me where I could leave my cloak? I should like my maid to remain here, if it is not against the rules.'

Mr Smythe smiled. He had rather a familiar way, so Shirley decided to keep him at a distance. It was really only his friendly manner, the result of long contact with professional vocalists, amongst whom (as everybody is aware) the utmost harmony prevails, jealousy or malice being unknown. For Mr Fountain Smythe was the eminent musical impresario under whose direction scores of dinner programmes had been arranged, dozens of aspirants in the world of song introduced and accompanied (on the piano) into public life by means of his genteel method. In fact, in civic festive circles Mr Smythe held quite a unique position, second only in importance to that dignified functionary the toast-master, who always drops his h's. Except to conduct at a Catch and Glee Club at Kennington, he rarely accepted other than city engagements. Indeed, his name was a household word at every company's

hall, or tavern where hospitality was dispensed, from Aldgate to Fleet Street—a programme not containing the announcement of ‘the musical arrangements under the direction of Mr Fountain Smythe, Orpheus Lodge, Lavender Hill,’ had failure stamped on the very face of it. Just then was the fag-end of an unusually lively dinner season, a period when Mr Smythe was in his element, as he got many a satisfying repast gratis, which may, in part, have accounted for the rotundity of his person.

‘Well, you will soon find out who I am. Meantime, make yourself at home in the green-room. We’re a free-and-easy party here, I assure you—no ceremony. Sorry I shall have to leave after we’ve sung grace, but there’ll be plenty of pop going—champagne, young lady—to keep up your courage. Hope you’ve got your songs perfect? It’s contrary to rules admitting a strange voice into our select set, but the chairman wished it, so I couldn’t refuse. You’ve a singing face and a pretty one, so I suppose it’ll be all right. Mind you sing out pluckily, and don’t be shy. After-dinner folks aren’t over critical. Let’s see, you’re down for “Wavelets” and “Purple Heather”—nice songs both of ’em. Good-bye for the present. I’ve a lot to get through before we begin.’

There was only one other occupant of the room, a lady of uncertain age, who sat in the corner, looking, Shirley thought, rather weary. She wore a red shawl, as if susceptible of cold, and had a music case on her lap. Directly Mr Smythe had bustled off, she rose and came forward briskly.

‘Let me present myself also. Madame Blanche Romaine, “the eminent contralto”—at Shepherd’s Bush plain Mrs Frampton—whose services are avail-

able for At Homes, soireés, or garden parties, besides teaching the higher branches of her profession to those desirous of an introduction into public life. When you're rid of your encumbrances, you'll come and sit by me, won't you? I'm forced to be rather starchy before our friend, he's so very—suppose we say?—effusive. You'll find I'm quite different on acquaintance, though a sad Bohemian. I would recommend you not to part with that wrap. The draughts in these city places are awful.'

What a very outspoken lady! Yet somehow Shirley's heart at once went out to Mrs Frampton. Her manner was so cordial; what was better still, she felt sure, sincere. The girl had already seen enough shams in her young life to detect the true woman when she met one. Besides, with all her vivacity, this chilly contralto did not look quite happy; as if the market for pupils were dull, consequently unremunerative; as if whatever eminence Mrs Frampton had reached had not brought her affluence. Could Shirley have peeped into Madame Romaine's lodgings, she might have prided herself on her discernment. For hers had been, and was still, a bitter struggle to make two ends meet—a problem attacked with iron will, cheerful, uncomplaining submission, but one which she had never yet satisfactorily solved.

'You must prepare yourself for a good long wait presently. The courses at these Festivals seem interminable. But we shall be able to hear the speeches when they do begin. I hope you will enjoy them as much as I do. Then, they treat us royally in the matter of refreshments, so we ought not to grumble. Our tenor and bass have previous engagements, so they won't be here till late. We are the only ladies

to-night. Here is the programme. Do I understand that you intend to become one of us by-and-by—Mr Fountain Smythe's troupe, as we have more than once been flippantly styled ?'

'Oh, yes ; that is quite decided—if I am successful this evening. Miss Felinda Turnbull tells me it is a capital way to gain a footing in the musical world. It gives one confidence also. You see,' Shirley laughed, 'I am not quite able to practise what I preach to my pupils, and must own to feeling uncommonly nervous.'

'Pupils ! Do you give lessons, then, as well ?'

'Indeed, I do. I have quite a respectable connection. Unfortunately they are not all quite so prompt as they should be in settling their accounts. Do you think I am too inexperienced to teach ? My age was very much against me at first, but I am growing older now—more old-maidish, which inspires respect.'

'I am fairly astonished,' exclaimed Mrs Frampton. 'Forgive a motherly old woman her inquisitiveness. But it does puzzle me how you have managed. Why, it has taken me years to form my circle ; it is not much to boast of even now. Were it not for an occasional guinea or two picked up in this line—I'm only a substitute to-night, not a regular member of the troupe—I should scarcely be as flourishing as you see I am. How ever did you contrive ?'

Mrs Frampton looked at Shirley almost hungrily, as if the girl were really able to furnish her with some charm against poverty and the pawnbrokers.

'I will tell you with pleasure. Owing to circumstances, we were obliged to live abroad for a couple of years. There I had opportunities for study and

tuition, which have since proved invaluable. I am afraid I am talking rather like a prospectus?’

‘Never mind. Pray go on.’

‘Well, music is so cheap and good in Germany, as of course you know, that we were able to secure a first-class professor on remarkably low terms. My sister plays accompaniments beautifully; as we worked hard, I soon made progress. What do I not owe to our darling mother’s firmness and encouragement at a time when I fear I was very unruly! But for her foresight, we might now be nearly penniless. Then, after she was taken from us, and we returned to England, we made the acquaintance of those sweet Miss Turnbolls, who have always been our truest, most devoted friends. They never rested till they had found me a family at Finchley. I suppose I gave satisfaction, for they recommended me to others. You see, I have been very lucky. I should not have got on a bit of my own accord.’

‘I am not so sure about that, Miss Wodehouse. I have also lived abroad—in the West Indies—but it was a long while ago. I have likewise cause to bless the loved memory of one who urged me to cultivate the voice God has given me against a rainy day, which, alas, came all too soon. For he was called to rest. My babies and I had to leave that dear island, with its wealth of sunshine, its warm sea-breezes, for cold, workaday London.’

‘Why, Mary—our Mary—was born out there!’

‘And who may our Mary be?’

‘How stupid of me. Of course I should have explained. Mary Grace Ivimey, an old school-fellow of mine. Now, unfortunately, she is Mrs Stapleton. She lives with us.’ Shirley’s eyes filled with tears. ‘It is

a wretched business, and makes me miserable every time I think of it. She, so gentle and clever, sacrificed to a creature utterly unworthy of her, a constant drag, her life made a dreary blank in consequence. The worst of it is, we are as powerless to help as she is apparently to get rid of him ; that does seem to me such a disgrace in a Christian country. Already there has been no end of fuss and expense with the lawyers over what must be such a simple matter. But, as far as I can understand, she is bound as tightly as ever. More than that, even after having behaved as badly as any man could, he seems still to have the right to tear our pet from us, and make her keep house for him again. Is it not shameful?'

'It is very sad. But on so important an occasion as this, you must try to forget your friend's troubles, and think only of how best to do justice to your talents. We shall have to go on directly. They have put up the screen. Listen, Mr Smythe is running his fingers over the key-board. He has an exquisite touch, and accompanies in a masterly manner, so you need not be uneasy. There is also the remains of a good voice about him, as you will hear when we give the blessing before meat in unison.'

Mrs Frampton went up to the screen on tip-toe, and looked between the joins, as an anxious stage-manager might have done through the hole in his curtain.

'They're taking their seats,' she whispered back. 'Such an odd collection of humanity, not unlike the old Exeter Hall audiences when the Sacred Harmonic sang there too many years ago for me to care to remember. Come and peep through the other chink. Isn't it funny to see so many black coats and bald heads in the same room? The waiters, you will ob-

serve, all have white cotton gloves on, to prevent the plates from slipping. The gallery at the far end is for the musicians, when there is a ball. Those pictures are considered very valuable. But you will get a better view presently. Are you ready? Don't be afraid. The gallant Mr Smythe will come and fetch us.'

'My lords and gentlemen, pray silence for grace,' came the stern injunction of the toast-master. There was a shuffling noise as of many persons rising to their feet simultaneously. A kindly hand grasped Shirley's arm, and, with throbbing heart, she passed in front, into full view of what seemed a myriad pair of eyes glaring at her. Somebody in the profession had recommended her always to look over an audience's head, never at it; above all, never at a particular individual, which would be fatal to self-composure, besides being forward. So when Shirley opened her mouth and sang, it was to the central of the four stone figures which held the gallery up on their bowed shoulders. Had that grimy support suddenly become instinct with life like another Galatea, under the influence of that sweet gaze, nobody need have been astonished. The Latin chant did not offer much opportunity for vocal display, but the three voices harmonised admirably, the lines, moreover, being perfectly rendered. Some of the diners, had such a thing been reverent, would not have objected to an encore. More than one head was turned towards the youngest of the trio, and curiosity stirred as to what she was to favour them with later.

'There, it was not such a dreadful ordeal, after all, was it? You have a lovely voice, and what is more, know how to use it,' congratulated Mrs Frampton. 'Is it not so, Mr Smythe?'

The impresario was not rash enough to commit himself so soon. Possibly he may have felt a trifle jealous because the lady had not come out exactly under his fatherly guidance.

'Miss Wodehouse will be an acquisition in time, I haven't a doubt. But we'll wait for her songs before a decided opinion.'

Then he slipped into the hall, and took his customary seat at the festive board, amongst the representatives of the press, from whose inspired lips he picked up many a dry, mirth-provoking anecdote, invaluable for dissemination at other banquets. Mr Smythe was soon busy with his knife and fork.

'I felt all of a tremble, as if I wanted to sit down; whatever was the reason?' inquired Shirley. 'Just feel my hands; they are as cold as ice. It is very extraordinary. I have sung at penny readings and never felt like that.'

'It is only a mild attack of stage fright, incidental to a first appearance, and will soon pass off. I was just the same when I began. Let me recommend a glass of Mr Smythe's "pop" as a restorative. Don't be shocked, but I always have a brandy and soda.'

'I am afraid anything so strong as either of those would get into my head, then where should I be? Miss Felinda thought there might be some ginger-wine and oranges.'

'A most unsatisfactory form of refreshment. Now you accept my prescription. It will do you all the good in the world.'

After some persuasion, Shirley had a glass of champagne and a biscuit, feeling much better for the dose. Then these two opposite characters, who had taken such a fancy to each other, got quite lost in a delightful inter-

change of ideas, forgetful of the clatter and buzz of conversation close to them, oblivious also of Eliza, who sat in the corner, mute, but faithful, as she would have done until midnight unless otherwise bidden. It was only when Mr Smythe hurried in, with the latest press joke still reflected on his countenance, that Mrs Frampton and Shirley were recalled to themselves.

‘Finch and Champion not here yet? What a nuisance. There’ll be the devil to pay—beg pardon, I’m sure—it’ll be precious awkward, I mean, if they don’t turn up. Luckily they’re not down till after Mr Button’s speech. Once on his legs, there’s no saying when he’ll stop. Dear, dear, what wags those newspaper chaps are to be sure! My sides quite ache with laughing. You’re ready with your “Fragments,” I hope, madame?’

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when they heard the announcement, ‘My lords and gentlemen, pray silence for a song by Madame Blanche Romaine—“Fragments.”’

It was wonderful how Mrs Frampton forgot herself and her troubles when engaged in her professional duties. Shirley, following eagerly those deep tones, as they rose and fell with such cultivated art, could hardly believe it was the same woman who, a few minutes before, had sat beside her, the record of patient suffering written on her pale lined face. Shirley admired the firm grip the singer took of her song, the faultless phrasing; how she became thoroughly one with the story of those fragments, which, in the end, were pieced together so satisfactorily. No wonder the last verse had to be repeated, or that it was followed by loud applause when Mr Smythe led on the contralto to make a second curtsy. Without a tinge of

envy, the girl joined in the chorus of approbation. As for her bodyguard, she could only murmur that it was 'Ea'venly.'

Then followed several speeches, duly heralded by the toast-giver in his most grandiloquent, if somewhat husky, fashion and touching disregard of the aspirate. Shirley could not but remark the singular ease with which some of the speakers drifted into all sorts of irrelevant topics, one even going so far as to drag in a dissertation on socialism, which struck her as about as far removed from the object the gentlemen had met together to promote as anything very well could be.

In consequence of this erratic system of oratory, Shirley found it difficult to follow the thread of the speakers' flights of eloquence. She fell, instead, into quite a dreamy condition, which was an unpardonable weakness, and must have been the result of that cheering glass of wine to which she was so unaccustomed. As she sat there nerving herself to face those diners again, a most curious delusion possessed her.

She fancied she heard Robert's voice pleading for the poor sick creatures who could not help themselves. Unlike many who had spoken, every word he uttered was to the point, full of a quiet, impressive dignity which carried conviction with it. Robert had taken for his text Pope's beautiful and appropriate lines—

' In Faith and Hope the World will disagree,
But all mankind's concern is Charity.'

He was endeavouring, with a modest depreciation of his own fitness for the task, to enforce that Christian precept upon his hearers. He wished to bring home to every member of that assemblage the responsibility of trying to alleviate the sufferings of those less for-

tunate brethren whom many a fell disease had driven to take refuge in this admirable institution; to contrast their own exemption from bodily ailments—he trusted they all enjoyed the priceless blessing of health—with the adverse fate which had overtaken these others. Their respected chairman would presently plead far more eloquently than he on behalf of this most deserving charity. But Robert hoped that the few remarks he had been privileged to make, as substitute for one unfortunately absent from their midst, might not be altogether wasted. He urged those present to give liberally of their means—thereby endorse that wholesome lesson the poet's words so tersely and truthfully expressed.

Shirley was roused by hearing her name whispered vigorously in her ear.

‘Did you ever, miss? Why, if it isn't Mr 'Ossack! No wonder you look so pleased. But I wouldn't go to sleep just yet awhile if I was you. Because it's your turn next.’

‘What is that you say?’ cried Shirley, jumping to her feet. The colour rushed to her cheeks, to leave them suddenly quite pale. Happily Mrs Frampton's back was turned, or the secret of the girl's heart would have been laid bare. ‘You are quite right, Eliza. It is Mr Hossack, and it was very rude of me to nearly fall asleep during his speech. Now, you will get back quickly to your corner, will you not?’

‘Whatever can have come over Miss Shirley to make her turn red and white like that? Somehow I did think, when he was with us, as how— Well, it's no business of mine anyway. He do talk beautiful to be sure.’

Eliza relapsed into her former attitude of respectful attention.

Needless to say, Shirley was wide-awake to hear the appreciative murmur which greeted Robert's peroration. His words had evidently touched his audience. Shirley thought, if she had never set eyes on him, she must have loved him then and there for the noble sentiments he expressed. She wished the sceptical Mary could have heard them. Then all doubt as to his goodness must have been instantly removed.

Yet, oddly enough, at that moment Shirley regretted she had come into the city. Having done so, she wished some trap-door would open at her feet and convey her into darkness, to collect her senses after this strange surprise. If she could only run away to hide those tell-tale blushes! She felt sure they would betray her to everybody in the room, and—dreadful suspicion—perhaps to him. Were that so, she would sink through the platform for very shame.

‘What a forcible appeal; spoken by a fine fellow, too. I hope you listened attentively?’ inquired Mrs Frampton. She glanced keenly at her companion. ‘Bless me, it's long past the time for another dose. Now, be a good child; you really must take it.’ By some magic means Shirley found herself indulging in a second glass of champagne. ‘That's famous. Now you will be able to trill like a nightingale.’

Yes, she would be brave, and sing her best—for his dear sake. It would be a mortification, indeed, were she to break down under the circumstances. Besides, she owed it to Mr Button, the Misses Turnbull, her own reputation, to do her very utmost to please the subscribers. She must not forget that she was a public servant on that occasion, actually to be paid for her services. Bearing that fact in view would steady her resolution, and prevent a *fiasco*. The difficulty would

be to resist the temptation of seeking that loved face amongst the throng. She must be more than ever attentive to her friend under the gallery. In the middle of her cogitation came the inexorable summons, 'My lords and gentlemen, pray silence for a song by Miss Shirley Wodehouse—"Wavelets."'

'Forget there's anybody in the room. Just let yourself go as if you were up at that pretty cottage you have been telling me about. And mind you restrain an inclination to stand on tip-toe when you reach the high notes. You'll score a success,' was Mrs Frampton's hastily offered advice.

The next minute Shirley, as it seemed to her, was the cynosure of a sea of upturned faces, with more glaring eyes than ever set in them. Had vanity found a place in her composition, she might have noticed that expectancy predominated. Will and pluck being, instead, strongly grafted on her character, she invoked their aid at that trying moment. Happily they responded to the call. But for that uncomfortable trembling sensation about the knees, the songstress felt almost composed. The first notes struck by Mr Smythe brought renewed courage. It was obvious she had nothing to fear from that quarter. Here was a born pianist, who would wait upon her with all the skill and tact a varied professional experience could afford. As the short introduction, which so cleverly suggested the ever-restless, heaving movements of the sea, was being played, Shirley succumbed to the spell its repetition always worked upon her. Her very soul went forth to the delicious melodies the executant's fat fingers produced; they seemed able to extract new beauties from measures she had heard scores of times. Everybody who sings knows the confidence

inspired by a reliable accompanist. It was that conviction which came to Shirley's aid. As the experienced Mrs Frampton had done, so this novice sank her own identity in the essay she was called upon to make. The hall being large, her voice powerful, she did let herself go, as she had done once or twice before, with a result altogether satisfactory. As the first clear ringing notes went forth, all felt that a treat was in store for them—an enjoyment enhanced by the fresh beauty and unaffectedness of the performer. Shirley's song won approval all along the line of heads—bald or covered.

Mrs Frampton was waiting at the wings.

'Bravo, bravissimo. You sang like a true artiste, with infinite feeling. I would give something to be able to lift my voice again as you do, instead of croaking away in the minor. What a noise they are making. You will have to go and quiet them.'

Only one thought filled Shirley's mind. Had Robert approved her effort? Was he, who under other circumstances had thanked her so often in his quiet, earnest way, applauding with the rest, or gently blaming this broader departure? Although outwardly faithful to the bent figure under the gallery, Shirley's heart recognised but one listener—one who was so near and yet so far away. All the clapping of hands and congratulations would be empty were he to disapprove. Oh, what misery this silent, tongue-tied love brought with it.

'A thousand thanks, Miss Wodehouse. It was splendid,' came from Mr Smythe. 'I hate encores, but you'll have to oblige again, please. Try a charity-bob, if you like, but I don't think it will stop them.'

Shirley did not know what a charity-bob was, but

the graceful obeisance she made certainly did not pacify them, only stimulating the diners to renewed manifestations. So she was perforce compelled to repeat the last verse of her 'Wavelets,' which she did with, if anything, more abandon and richness of expression than before.

'I should like to sit quite still, without talking, to collect my wits, if you will not think me rude,' Shirley said to Madame Romaine, almost imploringly, when the din was over. 'I am so unused to this sort of reception, you know; my head feels all in a whirl. I never dreamt people could make such a fuss over me. I am afraid I shall never be able to stand a public career. If they are so noisy at a festival, what must it be like at a real concert?'

'It is pleasant music, when you get accustomed to it, dear young lady.' Mrs Frampton did not say how often the same had cheered her anxious heart, spelling as it did warmth and food for her bairns at home. 'You have a good rest, and I'll keep watch, for fear some of your admirers storm the green-room in their impatience. Why, I declare, here is a *billet doux* already!' as a waiter handed Shirley a visiting-card. 'Conquest number one, I suppose?'

'How very funny! Pray tell me what I ought to answer. Perhaps the inquiry must be meant for you?'

The woman took the card from Shirley's trembling fingers, and read these pencilled words: 'Mr St Aubyn-Pye's compliments to Miss Wodehouse, and what would be her terms to sing at a garden party next Tuesday? The Shrubberies, Wimbledon Common, S.W.'

Mrs Frampton laughed merrily.

'This is splendid. Write back, twenty guineas for

three songs. But that you leave your engagements, as a rule, to your agents. What a slice of luck! Nothing succeeds like success, you know. Pray don't look so upset. The old gentleman means it kindly enough, although he had better have approached you through Mr Button. But people are not always as discriminating as they might be after dinner. Seriously, I would recommend you to accept. There is no telling what such a chance may lead to.'

'I never dreamt of this sort of thing happening. I could not possibly say yes without first asking my sister.'

'Then write your unknown admirer a polite note and tell him so.'

'If you would help me, I should be so grateful.'

'With all the pleasure in life.'

At Mrs Frampton's dictation, Shirley wrote the following :—

'Miss Wodehouse presents her compliments to Mr St Aubyn-Pye, and regrets that she is unable to give him an immediate reply to his inquiry. Miss Wodehouse will not fail to write definitely on the subject to-morrow, after consulting with her friends.'

'That will do well. There is just a suggestion of repulse about it which may induce the Wimbledonian to be more discreet in future. Now I will be as quiet as a mouse.'

Whilst Shirley sits there collecting herself after her triumph, let us examine Robert's feelings, roused by the unexpected, albeit pleasurable, surprise of meeting the girl he worshipped, and from whom, some might say, over-nice scruples of honour had prompted him

to estrange himself. He had been late in entering the room, so that Shirley's appearance, immediately after his speech, came with quite dramatic force. Might it not be accepted as a happy omen for the future—a kindly indication by the finger of Fate—that Love's all-powerful magnet was not to be easily held back when once it had resolved to draw two human lives together? A romantic idea, no doubt, but finding favour with some believers in prognostics. During those few weeks, which had seemed years, amidst his new surroundings, Robert had striven with all the strength of a no common will to compel his soul's submission to what he considered the only proper course to pursue. As we know, he had made up his mind that this love must, at all costs to himself, be lived down and conquered. He saw no possibility of doing so, except by thus voluntarily tearing himself away from the presence of his idol. How bitter was the anguish that decision called forth he alone could tell. Once or twice Robert had felt that his resolution must give way; that the torture of separation was too much to ask any mortal to bear; that he must seek his dear one again, to learn his fate for good and all. Then pride would come to his rescue, with the buoyant, comforting reflection how the fight in which he was engaged was a worthy, ennobling one. That Victory must, in the end, crown this subjugation of Self and passion. In his solitary walks and self-examinations by day and night, whether through the busy streets or quieter parks and gardens, where the country found a faint reflection, Robert grappled manfully with this the hardest call his lot had made upon him. The unattainable must be relinquished, the flesh subdued and mortified. It must be so, and, with Another's aid, it should.

That was what Robert told himself over and over again. With the result that his heart became almost reconciled to the inevitable, be its decree ever so harsh. After all, the lesson was no new one. Throughout his early career he had been forced to exercise much repression, as disappointments without end crowded upon him, and might well have levelled a more stubborn will than his. He, who had won such creditable fights, was surely not to be worsted by this puny foe, whatever mischief his darts might carry with them. Robert must rise above circumstances — prove his manhood by cheerfully resigning a love which was almost sinful, now that he felt convinced Shirley's heart belonged to another. Such a careful student of humanity for business purposes could not be deceived. Anybody who had watched this sweet girl must have seen a dozen indications that she was under the influence of the tender passion. Yet, with all his discernment, Robert could not be certain as to the lucky individual who had gained so rich a prize. Shirley's circle of admirers was wide, which made the task of selection by no means easy. But Robert thought the favoured one was Mr Ferguson.

Well, she would make an admirable clergyman's wife. This young curate, meek and retiring though he was, seemed a very sterling fellow. That he was a lucky one there could be no manner of doubt. Robert's only desire being for Shirley's happiness, he must feel thankful that it was not to be risked in company with one of those vapid, over-dressed youths who were so desirous to escort the singing-mistress home after her lessons.

This, then, after deep consideration and much mental chastisement, was the state of patient endurance into

which Robert was brought. Certainly it was not a kindly fate, but must none the less be borne with that spirit of submission which he hoped was not quite dead within him.

Now, sitting at that table with the consciousness of having done his best in aid of an institution in which he took a sincere interest, lo, Shirley Wodehouse suddenly stands before him, in all her nameless grace and innocent beauty! What wonder if Robert fell under the old charm and drank in those precious notes, which had so often consoled him. There was no more genuine testimony to her success than from him whose heart beat wildly with rekindled emotion.

What should he do? His dear one was probably aware of his presence in that room. He owed it to their old friendship to see that she wanted for nothing. He might even save her from the too pressing, though well-intentioned, gallantries on the part of some of the auditory, prone to let their feelings get the better of them—after dinner. Should Robert go to her at once, or when the festival was over? He would wait until Shirley had sung her second song, make some excuse, and join her. He was there to support the chairman. It would never do to leave the table before the speech of the evening—such an act might be construed into a slight towards a most benevolent, amiable gentleman. He must exercise just a little further patience; perhaps he would be rewarded.

Robert often wondered afterwards how he contrived to sit out Mr Button's address, which, however excellent in intention, could not possibly be called fluent; or the ballads given so efficiently by the popular Messieurs Finch and Champion; above all, the indistinct, halting sentences vouchsafed by a youthful noble-

man, who sounded all his r's like w's, and somehow conveyed the impression that it was a condescension on his part to have devoted a few hours of his valuable time to a personal inspection of the hospital. When at length Shirley came on with her 'Purple Heather,' looking more bonny than ever, and enchanted those present with a really superb rendering of a difficult song, Robert decided not to lose a moment in personally offering his congratulations: of what discourtesy might she not, and with justice, accuse him were he to remain silent? He slipped quietly out when he found an opportunity. Nor had he much time to spare, just catching Shirley as she left the green-room. Her head was enveloped in a white fleecy 'cloud.' With sparkling eyes, cheeks flushed with excitement, she looked altogether bewitching. Mr Ferguson was indeed a lucky divine, thought Robert, with a sigh. The songstress's heart beat wildly. But she was not going to make a noodle of herself after her recent display of courage.

'Thank you so much for paying me a visit, Mr Hossack. Eliza and I were bustling off, as it is so late, and we have already kept Dawes waiting nearly an hour. What a splendid speech you made. I had no idea you were such an orator. You seem to be always appearing in some fresh character. Certainly your last is a brilliant one.'

Robert bowed.

'You exaggerate my powers of eloquence, Miss Wodehouse. Any feeble light of mine is quite dimmed by the lustre of yours.' (Eliza was right. Robert could, on occasion, talk beautiful.) 'Let me compliment you sincerely on your well-deserved success. My neighbours were in raptures. Believe me, your voice rang true and rich.'

‘Oh, it was really nothing. I should never have got through my performance but for that sweet Mrs Frampton—Madame Romaine, I mean. I had a severe attack of platform fright, but she laughed me out of it. Just imagine, the chairman has sent me a cheque for two guineas. There is also the chance of getting an engagement for a garden party on Tuesday. Isn’t it wonderful?’

In her anxiety to conceal her confusion, Shirley felt she was growing exceedingly flighty; talking a deal of nonsense, in fact, which could not possibly interest Mr Hossack in the least. He, in his turn, was conscious that, under the combined influence of nervousness and emotion, he was adopting a stilted mode of conversation which had at times crept unawares into his fiction—a lapse his critics were by no means backward in recognising. When two love-sick people are playing at cross-purposes thus, these attacks do sometimes occur.

‘It is no more than you deserve—I trust only the commencement of great doings in the future.’

‘You are very good, I am sure.’ Shirley wished Robert would not say pretty things. There was an odd sensation in her throat already. She felt she must break down if he did. She changed the conversation by remarking: ‘Neil is still with us at the Cottage, you know, but we see very little of him because of that horrid city. I hope you are comfortable in Mannteufel Street? I must have my joke about that locality.’

‘At my high-class pension? The house is well enough, very central, as our manageress takes every possible care to impress upon her visitors. You may imagine it is a change for me after my quiet life at Hampstead.’

That sentence struck Shirley as evasive. She gleaned therefrom that Robert was neither happy nor at ease where he stayed.

'I can well believe it. I daresay you find it difficult also to secure a nook to write in without being disturbed.'

Shirley longed to ask why he had run away in such a hurry—why he did not return to their neighbourhood? The place was so lovely just then, and, judging from her cousin's attentions, quite a Tom Tiddler's ground for authors to pick up inspirations. But she supposed such a question might be considered bold. In the exuberance of her spirits, and scorn of the conventional, Shirley had very nearly offered Robert a seat in Miss Turnbull's brougham. As far as she was concerned, she saw no possible harm in the proposal. But a glance at the set features of her bodyguard happily saved her from such a shocking breach of the proprieties.

'I am pleased to say that a very substantial sum has been collected this evening,' continued Robert nervously. 'The hospital is sadly in want of funds, so you will feel that your voice has been well employed. The committee are most grateful for your assistance.'

'Pray don't thank me. It was nothing; for what I may have done I have been most liberally paid. Now we must really be going. I am keeping you standing in a draught. Good-bye, Mr Hossack. Can I give any message to my cousin? Nora is getting on splendidly with her tales, you will be glad to hear. We seem steeped in literature up at the Cottage now. Our friend Mrs Stapleton is quite a celebrity already.'

What messages would not Robert have imparted to those rosy lips, had not honour, as he thought, held him

back—not for Neil Challoner, but for Shirley's dear self to retain? As for cold, he would have sat complacently on an iceberg, without a murmur, in such congenial company.

He controlled himself, simply saying, 'That is good news. My sincerest congratulations, please. Let me offer you my arm downstairs.'

Sure enough, just as Robert was helping Shirley into the carriage, and felt that electrical touch, which once before had brought him great perplexity, and nearly to the verge of desperation, Mr Ferguson became apparent on the kerbstone. He had on a hat and cape of such dimensions as to give him quite the air of a brigand.

'I had occasion to come into the city to attend a discourse. Hearing you were in Aldersgate Street, I ventured to see if I could render any service,' the curate stammered.

'How extremely kind of you!'

Was there not a shade of irony, even disappointment, in Shirley's voice as she acknowledged the little man's forethought? Girls were very unaccountable creatures under certain circumstances; but Robert flattered himself he detected those symptoms. It was odd behaviour, though, towards a favoured suitor.

'I have managed famously, thank you all the same. I think you know Mr Hossack?'

Eliza was not so tolerant of the interruption. For she brought her umbrella down on the splashboard with such a thwack as to rouse Phœbe effectually from her slumbers, when the grey mare started off at a pace which put a summary stop to all further leave-takings.

Robert was left standing bareheaded on the pavement, confronting his fancied rival.

CHAPTER VI.

RELEASE.

IT is late in the evening of the last day Mr Stapleton had named as the limit for him to claim his wife. All through those dreary hours Mary has sat alone in her chamber, prepared and resolute, waiting patiently to meet the storm which must break ere long. Under the pressure of all this worry, her pen lies idle, the brain refusing to answer to the helm. For years the clouds have been gathering round her life, darkening its joys, menacing the future. Now they are massed, black and ominous, above her head. But she will not alter her decision. As the law, with its cruel delays, only mocks her desire for release, she must strike for herself with the trusty weapon the Maker has placed in her hand, the sword which the consciousness of right and honesty, apart from mankind's instinctive yearning for freedom, strengthens her to wield against this accursed dead weight of a wrong irreparable. Mary has decided that no human force or threat shall drag her from her new home of peace.

Throughout that darksome day a gloom has hung heavily over the inmates of Prospect Cottage. All have been restless, oppressed with the dread of coming evil, their nerves excited and on the strain. No re-

ference has been made to the impending visit. Rather, by every means at their disposal have those sisters tried to lessen Mary's suspense, and lead her thoughts from the distressing subject. But, although tacitly ignored, the threat has lost none of its terrors. If this husband does carry out his purpose, it seems to them such a merciless termination to their scheme of rescue—a reproach on all that is just and right in civilisation. For if ever human being had earned rest and immunity from persecution, Nora and Shirley considered Mary Stapleton had done so.

'It is already past nine o'clock, dear,' Nora is saying to the silent woman, who sits pale and motionless amid the gathering shadows. 'He will scarcely come now. Perhaps, after all, it was only some empty menace. I have heard of persons unhappily addicted to intemperance taking most singular notions, which they forget all about in their more rational moments.'

Mary smiles sadly.

'I have no doubt you have made an exhaustive study of the disease, Nora. But there has been no delusion this time, I assure you. My husband is perfectly serious in his intention. As determined, indeed, to claim me as I am resolved to resist his blandishments. Not that it makes much difference one way or the other. For as far as getting any enjoyment out of my life goes, I have given up that idea long ago. Still, I should prefer to spend the remainder of my days after my own fashion, without the companionship of one who has done his best to wreck my happiness. Why should I mince matters? That is the truth, is it not? I prefer plain speaking to-night.'

Nora is much disturbed.

'It grieves me sorely to find you in this cold, resent-

ful mood, Mary. Even presuming things to be at their worst—which I do not for an instant acknowledge—you who are so clever will find immeasurable relief in the knowledge that you are employing your gifts for the benefit of others. For their sakes, you must endeavour to live on in contentment. Happiness will surely follow in due time.'

Mary shrugs her shoulders impatiently.

'That is such a dreadfully stale argument, begging your pardon, Nora. I never could recognise the wisdom of it. You will want me next to rush into my husband's arms, and ask his forgiveness for some offence I have never committed, I suppose?'

'Oh, no! I should be the last to counsel such an indecorous proceeding. Nor do I think any course I have ever advocated can justify your putting so mischievous a construction upon my meaning. Dear Mary'—Nora presses her lips to the cheek of her companion, as she whispers—'do try to take a healthier view of eventualities. My nerves may be a little unstrung this evening, but I can hardly exaggerate my distress at finding you in so unchristianlike a condition. Perhaps it ill becomes me to lecture you, because naturally I am unacquainted with such trials as you have borne so nobly. Still, if you could only tell me that you will try and be content with your lot, if for nobody else, then for our sakes, I should feel so happy. If I am very selfish in asking that for Shirley and myself, you must forgive me.'

'What a queer little body it is! As if my doing what you wish could bring good to anyone! I have told you over and over again that I have lived my life for what it is worth. That it has proved a lamentable domestic failure is scarcely my fault.

Voila! Let us drop the subject. I do not think I have much more to reproach myself with than most mortals, which is a great blessing. I do not propose laying violent hands on myself, if that is what you are afraid of. But as to wishing to prolong my existence, to be a nuisance to others, I take it that would be altogether an unfair infliction. It will be ever so much better to retire gracefully into oblivion, and eat out my heart in solitude: by that arrangement I shall be harming no one but myself, humanity will be spared any danger resulting from my unorthodox views. Surely you must agree with me? I know very well what people would say. Don't give up now you have got the thin end of the wedge in. Stick to literature, drown your cares in a sea of printer's ink and probable rubbish. Join the mighty band of lady novelists, who turn out books with a persistence one might admire more were their energies devoted to the manufacture of small-clothes—those delicious volumes, with their immaculate grammar, sensations, suggestiveness, superb morality. Or perhaps you would like me to contribute some weekly instalment of gush and gossip, as picked up at my neighbour's tea-table whilst partaking of her hospitality? Thank you, I am not sunk quite so low as that. My brain is run dry, except for indulgence in much satire. Now my translation is finished, that capability seems exhausted. Having accomplished my purpose—I am uplifted enough to believe with skill—I feel as if I did not care ever to put pen to paper again. As for producing anything ennobling, as little Nora does, that is quite hopeless. Look at those blank sheets. A lucrative day's work truly! No, I am sure Roussoff is the only place for me. But I am not unreasonable. If you

will consent, we will start off as soon as possible. There are no end of attractions I have not told you about. Once pop you into Queen Mary's arbour, for instance, and there would be no getting you out of it. I can hide my diminished head in the company of those simple-minded natives, and—wait, with as much patience as is left me. I shall be able to watch the effect of my article better in France. You can elaborate those delightful tales whilst Shirley warbles to sea and sky, which are, after all, much more appreciative listeners than many audiences. Why, we shall be regular swells out in Finistère, however limited our incomes, if we make up our minds to rough it a bit. If this isn't "taking a healthy view of eventualities," I don't know what is.'

It is evident to Nora that the extreme tension under which her friend has laboured during the past few days has been almost too much for her; that, unless promptly checked, or its cause removed, the consequences may be serious. She must, therefore, be very considerate towards one threatened with no common crisis in her fortunes—a crisis which Nora earnestly trusts is over. All her persuasiveness must be enlisted to relieve Mary's overtaxed resources; to win back the admirable resolution which has already carried her triumphantly though so much. Once before Nora has been successful. Why should she not be so again?

With that kindly object in view, she sits quite still for several minutes. It is her plan when dealing with cases of this nature, and Nora has implicit faith in her mode of treatment. After her outburst, Mary relapses into her previous listless attitude. It is sad to see one usually so energetic a prey to this fit of melancholy.

But Nora does not propose to break in rudely upon her reverie, for if gloomy, it is no doubt tranquillising.

Nora is much puzzled, as well as grieved, that Mary should have drifted into this odd humour, concerning the morality of her writings. It is true the younger had more than once taken exception to the other's ironical style, but she had never doubted her good-faith. Indeed, she was now convinced that Mary was wise to employ that peculiar method, in the use of which she was such a mistress, to refute the dangerous statements she attacked so vigorously. It was bad enough to consider that the trouble she had undergone had for a while paralysed her gifts. But it would be worse than dreadful if she grew morbid, or gave up writing altogether, under some erroneous delusion as to the value of her achievements. Nora must do all she can to reason Mary into appraising her talents at their proper value. Everybody must recognise the courage shown in advancing her convictions under exceptionally adverse circumstances. It would be a thousand pities were she to stop now her pen was devoted to such admirable work. Nora must for ever blame herself lest her injudicious criticisms had in the least degree influenced such a decision. That is the bent of the young lady's cogitations as she shares her friend's solitude.

'He will scarcely come now,' Nora repeats softly. 'It is getting quite dark, long past supper time. Will you join us in the parlour, or shall I send you up something nice?'

Mary rises wearily.

'I will come down when I have made myself presentable. As for eating, that is out of the question.'

'Never mind, there will be no harm in trying. I

expect we shall be able to tempt you. At anyrate, you must afford us the chance— Eliza, Eliza, how many times have I told you not to enter a bedroom without knocking.'

Miss Pridham's niece stands on the threshold with a very scared expression.

'I humbly ask pardon, Miss Nora. But if you only knowed what's happened, you'd wonder I'm not more audacious still. Just to think, and at this time o' night—well, I never!'

Nora has turned nearly as pale as the handmaid. But she has presence of mind enough to try and cover the girl's ill-timed candour by exclaiming: 'What, another burglar! Eliza, I really am ashamed of your timidity,' with the whispered inquiry, 'Are Miss Shirley and Mr Nevill at home??'

'Yes and no, miss; they was and they wasn't. I'm that flustered I scarce know what I'm doing of. It's him as was expected, miss. Such a queer, white looking gent, all of a shake, with another like a keeper. Young master looked like fighting, but it wasn't no use. He couldn't keep 'em out. Aunt's nearly in highstrikes over the bother.'

'Do not trouble to speak so low on my account, good people. I can hear every word you say,' Mary Stapleton interrupts. There is a cold, harsh ring in her voice which is painful to hear. 'Give my compliments to those gentlemen; say I will be with them in five minutes. You should have told me they were here, Eliza. Surely a lady can receive a visit from her husband without all this ridiculous mystery and fuss? Go at once, as I bid you.'

There is a world of loving tenderness in Nora's eyes, as she turns and inquires,—

‘Dear Mary, are you really equal to this interview? How I wish I might ease your sorrow. Alas, in this instance, I am powerless. But God will be with you. Throw your burthen upon Him.’

‘It will only be the renewal of many similar domestic scenes, to which I am no stranger. I ought to be grateful for my long reprieve. Never fear, little Nora; I am quite ready to meet him. Though, I confess, I do not relish his companion. I have done nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘Rather, you have been greatly sinned against.’

‘Possibly. Now run away, and see that that stupid girl delivers my message correctly.’

It will not be difficult to imagine the state of alarm into which the others at the Cottage were thrown by the arrival of Mr Stapleton. Just as they were silently congratulating themselves that they had escaped the threatened catastrophe, footsteps were heard on the gravel walk.

Miss Pridham, who, according to invariable custom, was surveying the arrangements for supper, paused whilst smoothing out the creases in the tablecloth and exclaimed: ‘Drat it! I wonder if that girl of mine’s put the chain up.’

Shirley rose abruptly from the music-stool, crossing to where her cousin sat. Neil was far away with his poetry in dreamland; he did not at first grasp the situation.

‘Poor Mary! We had hoped her suspense was over. But I am afraid this horrid creature is coming, after all. Hark, there is a knock. Now, Neil, you are the only male representative of the establishment, so you must prove yourself Mary’s protector if necessary.’

You must go to the door first and see who it is. We may be mistaken.'

To be brought suddenly down from the realms of fancy to the menial duties of a lacquey—with the further possibility of being knocked on the head by a tramp—is not a kindly freak of fortune, especially for a poet. But when, in addition, one is asked to assume the character of champion to a married lady, harassed by an intemperate and possibly violent spouse, the claims of chivalry, even for grown-up knights, may be considered exacting. It was therefore much to Neil's credit that he promptly rose to his feet, and the occasion. He told Shirley not to be frightened.

'Who's there?' he inquired, with all the authority a master of the house should assume. The reply was unintelligible. Whatever it was, it sounded husky and rude. Neil also thought he detected an oath, but that must have been the result of a lively imagination. 'I cannot open the door, unless—'

'All right, sir,' a second voice answered persuasively. 'It's Mr Claud Stapleton. Sorry to be so late, but we missed the route.'

Neil turned to Shirley.

'There is no help for it. You must let them in.' So the lad undid the chain.

He certainly was not prepared for what he saw, and fell back a step, with an exclamation almost of terror. For many a long day the sight of that white, haggard face haunted him. It was as if a dreadful apparition were waiting to scare him—the mere semblance of a man, over whose feeble, shrunken limbs some devil had gained control, looking out from its habitation with staring, fever-lit eyes—an unlawful tenant who

had crept into God's noblest handiwork to befoul it. The spectre hung on to the arm of a clean-shaven, sinister-looking person who realised Neil's ideas of a detective. He was very polite, and spoke in tones which, although suave and respectful to a fault, yet conveyed the impression that the exigencies of his vocation had made him rather a humbug.

'Kindly bring a chair for Mr Stapleton, also half a tumblerful of water, young gentleman. I thank you. Mr Stapleton is rather fatigued after his climb; he will be himself again presently. No, I don't think we will drink any spirits just now, sir. Take a sip of this instead.' The attendant poured into the water a few drops of some liquid from a phial which he carried in his waistcoat pocket. 'Isn't that a fine pick-me-up? Better than all the brandy in Christendom, to my taste,' as he took the glass from the drunkard's trembling fingers.

'Where's my Mary? I want my Mary,' muttered Mr Stapleton querulously. 'Can't you find her for me, fool.'

'All in good time, my dear sir. Take my arm. This is the sitting-room, I imagine?'

What a harrowing spectacle it was to see this human being caught at last by the vile, implacable enemy which had ensnared him in its meshes. Those who had known Claud Stapleton before he fell beneath that fatal curse would have marvelled at the completeness of a body and soul's destruction; so perfect, indeed, that even the demon drink must have been satisfied. It was an awful, appalling picture—one which must have stirred the most careless.

'You will all go away, please,' came the calm voice of Mary Stapleton. 'I am sorry there is no other

room in which to receive my husband. But, under the circumstances, I am sure you will excuse me. Our interview is not likely to be a prolonged one. You,' turning to Mr Stapleton's companion, 'of course, remain within call.'

Sadly the three passed out, amazed at Mary's composure. The man bowed, and before following said something in a low voice.

'You may be quite assured of that,' answered the lady coldly.

On entering, Mary had not looked at her husband. She felt quite ready for what might happen. Still she did not wish to run the risk of breaking down before her friends. She had undergone great mental trial; there is a limit to human endurance. Although, in much, Mary's resolution was as strong as ever, unhappily her bodily strength had failed of late. In the early days of her neglect, when its sting rankled fresh and deep, she might have defied even the scourge of ill-health, as others may have done. But now it had come upon her in terrible earnest. She who was wont to override her troubles with a proud disdain, was too often prone to idle tears. What untold misery had failed to accomplish, sickness had in some measure brought about. It had succeeded in breaking down Mary's determined spirit. In her inner self she knew that much of the defiant attitude she had assumed before Nora Wodehouse was unreal. When the sympathetic little woman rose, Mary nearly fell upon her neck in abject contrition. How could she be so wicked as to use her sharp tongue in the presence of one so gentle? It would be a judgment upon her were this man, who had found her at the eleventh hour, to drag her back to slavery. But when she thought of him, the old

dogged obstinacy returned. She clinched her hands and called upon that courage, which had never yet failed her in peril, not to forsake her in this dire extremity. For days she had been nerving herself for it. Was she the woman to succumb to some foolish sentiment, when even the law had been brought within an ace of recognising her claims to enable her to uphold her rights before the world? After this fight for liberty, surely she was not going to draw back as a coward might?

Mary, therefore, drew herself up to her full height when she found herself alone with Mr Stapleton. His head was averted; he sat crouched on the sofa, moaning, babbling, sometimes swearing like one bereft of his reason, which as a matter of fact he was.

‘You see, I am here as bidden, Mr Stapleton. I had hoped that you might have spared me this. As you have not done so, for mercy’s sake be brief. To save mutual recriminations, I may tell you that I am absolutely resolved to go on with my action. Any attempt, therefore, to upset my decision will be useless. You have, presumably, received my letters? What I have said in them is final: I have nothing to add. You may know enough of my character to believe that I am not easily changed when I have once made up my mind to a thing. If you have a spark of generosity or consideration left, respect my wishes, and begone. You have sinned, and suffered for your sin, which is just. But it is not just that its curse should longer fall upon me. If, in my turn, I have erred, God will pardon me—my sufferings have been great indeed. But I will never attempt to remedy my error, if such it has been, by so hazardous an experiment as you propose.’

But Mary’s words were not a faithful echo of her

thoughts. For at the sight of that sad spectacle of ruin the revulsion of feeling became complete. With one sharp pang the conviction burst in upon her that she had done wrong, utterly, inexcusably, in leaving one to whom she was bound by such sacred bonds. It mattered not what the provocation had been. Insult, torture, humiliation, should all have been borne without a murmur; that miserable pride, which had been her stumbling-block through life, ought to have been subdued, even though it were dragged through the dust. Claud had always been weak, and easily influenced. She, who had been blessed with a great moral firmness, should have been his protector, strengthening, shielding, condoning. Instead, she had been wicked and cowardly enough to forsake him, and violate her trust.

It would be untrue to write that, when all this came upon Mary with a swift, overpowering rush, her love at once returned. It had been too sorely trampled on for that. But she was filled with an intense pity, more than akin to love, when brought thus face to face with that shocking sight. For Mary read deeper than the boy Neil had done. What could those shaking limbs, the eyes with their unnatural brilliancy, those hollow, sunken cheeks mean, save that his sin had found Claud Stapleton out at last—that the grim enemy, Death, might be treading swiftly on his heels? When Mary saw that, she was filled with an unspeakable remorse. There must be but one object, one yearning desire, one prayer for her now. She must rescue him from his bondage, if it were not too late. Day and night she must slave for, tend, and do battle for him against this demon of Drink. Mary might not save his life, but she would strive with all her might to save his soul. Not a moment was to be lost, if she meant

to win. It must be her mission, hers alone, to coax back the clouded intelligence, strengthen the tottering limbs, whisper of Faith, the hope of Salvation, into the mind of this frail mortal who had fallen so low. Mary must instantly take her place beside one she had wickedly left, and prove thereby that her penitence was sincere; the wife must repair the evil she had wrought. She, so strong, must lay all a woman's devotion and watchful care at her husband's feet, heeding no repulse, bearing every indignity—no penance could be too severe for her. The tenderest chords of her nature had been struck. She held her own life valueless before this great duty to which her eyes were opened.

'Claud, forgive me! I do not mean those words.' Such was Mary's agonised appeal as she fell upon her knees beside the couch. 'I have sinned; I am penitent. Take me back with you, where you will. I promise never to leave you again.'

Oh, for just one fond look as of old; one kind word to sustain her in this misery of her awakening!

'Come back with me! Of course you will. You don't think I'm going to let you go again after all the trouble we've had to catch you? How the deuce you managed to give us the slip so often I can't make out. If it hadn't been for that yellow skinned Yankee, with her lies, I should have found you long ago. Get up, and put your finery on. What's the use of grovelling to me? I'm no saint. Look sharp; my throat's as dry as a lime-kiln. That idiot Dawkins never will let me drink what I want when I'm thirsty.'

Mary rose meekly, as bidden. She must endure everything he said, however harsh it might seem at first. She had brought it all upon herself. The punishment was a righteous one.

'I will keep you but a very short while, dear Claud.'

Mr Stapleton had sunk back exhausted after his effort. A hacking cough set in, which tried him sorely. Mary called for Mr Dawkins.

Nora and Shirley, waiting anxiously outside, were startled at their friend's appearance. Her whole manner had changed during that brief interview. She was greatly agitated. Her words came fast.

'You must come up to my room to say good-bye, darlings. There is not one instant to lose. God forgive me, that I should have been so blind and wilful. Pray with me, sweet children, that my pride may be humbled, my repentance blessed. I go to take my proper place, by my husband's side.'

'Good-bye!' The word seemed to stun them. Their beloved, clever Mary was about to leave, after all. To go whither? Back with this sinful man, who had brought her endless pain by reason of his transgressions. Those who had plotted and planned for Mary's welfare were to lose her thus just as the shadow over her life seemed passing away. It was indeed a grievous blow. Should it be patiently borne, when they had decided that every resistance to so inhuman a course was justifiable? Yet it was their very Mary herself—she who had been the firmest in her decision to resist—who now, of her own free will, told them she must go! Did not every Christian precept tell them to step in and save her from so rash a step, be her intentions ever so admirable.

'I know what you would say, Nora and Shirley. But it would all be of no avail. Light has broken in, and shown me my only duty.'

Mary was hurriedly packing a few necessaries into her bag.

‘I know my conduct must appear utterly inexcusable; that, in your eyes, I am guilty of the basest ingratitude. But do not condemn me unheard. Emergencies come to most of us (when delay may prove fatal) which sweep all other considerations aside, even the fear of jeopardising such love as yours. Be patient, therefore, and do not judge me harshly. Presently you will understand everything. Now, you must be very practical and energetic, without asking for reasons. Above all, there must be no scene. All is ordained for the best.’

Mary rose from her knees and embraced her friends in turn with utmost tenderness.

‘Let me feel assured, darlings, that in this time of need your trust in me is not shaken. It will be an untold support in what I may have to endure.’

The girls’ hearts were too full for many words.

‘We could never doubt you, dearest Mary, come what may,’ Shirley answered through her tears. ‘One thing I entreat. Do not try to suffer alone, as you did before. Another separation like that would kill me.’

‘Shirley, I promise that. You will stop up here, both of you, will you not, until we have left? Your good cousin will assist us if necessary. I am so strong and well again now.’

‘Heaven will guide and watch over you,’ was all little Nora could say.

Almost before the two could realise what had occurred, their friend was gone.

It would be painful to linger at length over the events of the next few weeks, in which Mary Stapleton strove to repair the mischief she considered she had contributed to bring about. With almost superhuman

endurance, a devotion and self-sacrifice beyond all praise, she accepted her new responsibility, labouring with all her might to rescue her husband from the results of his sin.

Her first impulse was to dismiss this fawning attendant : who could be expected to get well with such a person for ever dogging one's footsteps? His patient required far gentler supervision than he could give. She felt that he would be a drag upon her ; to her overwrought sensibilities, he betrayed his calling in every line of his ill-favoured countenance. But Mary did Mr Dawkins an unintentional injustice. For, under trying circumstances, he had been very faithful, much of his servility being the outcome of the unfortunate nature of his vocation. Mary soon found that it was impossible to do without him ; for, alas, Mr Stapleton had violent moods, with which, single-handed, she was quite incapable of coping, or rather—as she was determined to believe—with the passion which had for a while killed his better self.

Was Mary repaid for this brave service? Only after weeks of devoted nursing, during which a wonderful patience supported her through disappointments which would have filled a less resolute woman with despair, did she reap reward for many an anxious hour of watchfulness and silent supplication. Soon she began to detect in a hundred trifling signs her husband's gradual recall to better things. A calmer, more resigned spirit seemed to be creeping over him. Above all, to Mary's joy, he restrained those horrible curses and accusations, which cut her to the quick, to increase the burthen of her sorrow a thousandfold. Amongst other delusions, the idea had seized Mr Stapleton that his wife was plotting to get him out

of the way in order that she might marry again—a conviction dwelt upon with maudlin persistence. From a constant resentment of Mary's presence, he passed to the opposite extreme, imploring her never to leave him, whilst he shed tears of penitence distressing to witness. These instances will suffice to show the deplorable state into which the inebriate had fallen.

But every unfeeling speech, each querulous demand, were instantly forgiven when Mary recognised the blessed change which heralded the sincere, if tardy, repentance. What everlasting cause for thankfulness to know that her prayer was heard ; that her husband would not go down into his grave unprepared ; that she would be saved the undying remorse which must follow as judgment on her neglect. Henceforward she could do battle for his body with rekindled faith, for surely the splendid reliance which had sustained her through so much would not desert her now she had been made the instrument to reach the far more precious precincts of his soul ?

From the day when a divine mercy stepped in thus to bring about Claud Stapleton's atonement, a renewal of the old, interrupted bliss came back to those two—a sanctified love, cemented beyond all fear of rupture. It was a reunion also rejoiced in by those other generous hearts, bound up with Mary's own in all things. The joyful intelligence found echo there, as every ebb and flow of the watcher's concern had done. How willingly Nora and Shirley would have shared the required vigils need scarcely be told. But Mary considered her penance would have been altogether incomplete had she permitted the sisters to relieve her of one tittle of responsibility. That sacrifice

denied them, they must be content to assist Mr Stapleton's good resolutions, encouraging him by every means in their power to relinquish his bad habits for ever. So Nora and Shirley journeyed down daily from their breezy northern home to the long, dull street—made more dreary by reason of the drawn blinds, proclaiming London's so-called emptiness—in which a woman's devotion had been so fully rewarded. They brought the brightness of their presence into the sick-house where the new man wrestled, but not alone, with an insidious vice, winning his way back inch by inch to health and self-respect. They did not tell of the many trudges made in the sultry August sun, whereby omnibus fares were saved for the purchase of those floral gifts which, small enough in value, were priceless in the eyes of nurse and invalid. Always cheerful, encouraging, hopeful, the visits were indeed precious stays to Mary during the time of convalescence. An unforeseen danger crept in to retard Mr Stapleton's recovery. He took so positive a dislike to those stimulants which, by abuse, had nearly proved fatal, that even his wife failed to get him to overcome his antipathy for remedies which, in moderation, were pronounced to be imperative. However, the difficulty was overcome by sundry harmless deceptions, in the employment of which, when needed, Mary was skilful. Although dictated by the friendliest motives, there was one mode of treatment against which Mary firmly, though kindly, set her face. This was the infallible tract cure, which little Nora was desirous of at once putting into operation. She had recently become possessed of a pamphlet of peculiar excellence, largely circulated amongst the donkey-boys and other rough people on

and around Hampstead Heath. In these well-intentioned pages the evil effects of drink were depicted pictorially and in print with quite ghastly emphasis—a method which, Nora was convinced, must have tended to widespread conversion. Could anybody doubt its efficacy as a moral tonic in Mr Stapleton's case? No wonder she pleaded earnestly for permission to try its soothing properties upon him. Reluctant though Mary was to cause the philanthropist disappointment, she felt it necessary to decline.

‘You must not be upset, but I really cannot allow it, Nora. Tracts may be all very well, but they would be quite out of place here. Why, you would reopen the very wound it is my desire day and night to close. We must have no lecturing, no allusions to the past—are we not all mortal, only too prone for sin? Indeed, I question very much whether anybody is so far above his fellows that he can afford to preach to them. If you must trot out your favourite hobby, have you not me to convert, with my whole host of failings?’

Nora looked very downcast.

‘I had hoped—but of course you know best, dear Mary. I have witnessed such wonderful results follow acceptance of the truths put forward by the society for which I have the honour to act as local secretary. It would have been my earnest endeavour to strengthen Mr Stapleton's firmness of purpose.’

The first smile that had lit up Mary's face for many a week brightened it as she listened to Nora's naïve suggestion.

‘So you shall, miss ; but not by a course of tracts. You shall come every day, when he is well enough, and establish yourself as companion, amanuensis—in any post of trust you like. Just now I am

extremely jealous of any interference with my patient.'

'Don't you think I might leave just this one on trial. See, it is so short. I assure you, the arguments in favour of total abstinence are most convincing,' urged the local secretary.

'Leave it, by all means, for me to peruse. Only, I warn you, I may become dangerous if you rouse my combative instincts. I might be tempted to enter the lists again, you know, with some fierce rejoinder, as in a noted instance. Talking of that, you will be glad to hear my essay has taken even deeper root in France than England. I have received highly complimentary letters from my publishers and Monsieur Plon. Better still, a substantial remittance, which I need not say came in most acceptably. I do not care to trouble dear Claud about money matters yet.'

'I am indeed delighted at this recognition of your gifts. How I wish I could induce you to employ your graphic pen on behalf of the noble cause we advocate.'

'More impossible things than that might happen. I am growing dreadfully mercenary—quite capable of selling my genius to the highest bidder.'

The two were strolling up and down Queen Anne Street under the still autumn sky. Shirley had persuaded Mary to breathe the fresh air, after being cooped up for so long, whilst she 'mounted guard' in Welpole Street. It was very quiet at that time of year, therefore quite an unnecessary precaution on Nora's part to drop her voice as she said,—

'There are many things I wish so much to tell you of, Mary, though, perhaps, I am selfish, when your thoughts must be so preoccupied with weightier matters. I should have done this before, but for

recent anxieties, now so mercifully removed, as, if you remember, I predicted they would be—some day. That time has now come round. I need not repeat how we all rejoice in consequence.'

'Please do not refer to my detestable ingratitude,' interrupted Mary. 'I have deeply repented of all the horrid things I said. You believe that, Nora, love?'

'I did not think your resentment unreasonable. If it were, you may rest assured I believe in the sincerity of your regret. We will say no more about it.'

'That is good of you. Now for this wonderful secret you have kept back so long.'

'There are several disclosures, only one of which is a secret. That I will keep to the last. The first has reference to my reception by the editor of *Scrivener's Bi-Monthly*, to whom you were obliging enough to introduce me.'

'Ah, our friend with the *élégants*? Well, how did he receive you?'

'Most kindly. He told me any manuscript I might submit to him would receive most careful consideration. What could be nicer than that? So I left "Anatole's Repentance." After waiting anxiously for many days, I received the politest of notes, asking me to favour the editor with a call when convenient. I make it a rule to respond to such invitations immediately. I will try and remember exactly what passed. The gentleman seemed very busy, but after waiting a considerable time, I was admitted to his presence. He looked at me very searchingly, as I thought, though I was too nervous to be sure of anything, except that I was all of a tremble. "I have read your manuscript, Miss Wodehouse," he said. "Excuse rather a bold inquiry. Did you write it all yourself?" "Every

word," I answered. "I have often been told that I should stand a better chance of recognition were I to accept the numerous offers of assistance I have received, but I am obstinate enough to prefer to stand alone, or not at all." "A very proper spirit too. I may say at once your story is excellent, and shows great promise, but, in the same breath, I must frankly own that, in my opinion, it has scarcely—shall we say?—go enough to suit the public. Good people would admire your book for its extreme feeling and kindness." Was not that comforting, Mary, dear? Small wonder my hopes ran high as to its acceptance. For, of course, if a book be good, it must, of necessity, succeed.' (Poor, innocent, trustful Nora!) 'Imagine how distressed I felt when the editor added, "Unhappily, readers are not always very wise or discriminating. They require feeding with certain strong dishes or their appetites are not satisfied. From a strictly business point of view, I fear, therefore, your style is too refined for modern palates. Therefore, sorry as I am, I have no option but to decline your story. I should recommend you to take it to the Row, where it might be accepted." I did not quite grasp what he meant by that. It seemed such singular advice to suggest offering my manuscript in so fashionable and, I fear, worldly a quarter. But perhaps he wanted to cheer me up with a joke, as I must have looked very despondent. Whatever he intended, he pressed my hand very warmly at parting. "Do not be discouraged, young lady. Everything must have a beginning. I have no doubt you will succeed in time. Make a careful study of the great masters of fiction, their development of ideas, mode of construction—the French are especially skilful in this respect,

though I would not advise imitation in other ways. Cultivate a natural form of dialogue, be unconventional without improbability. Avoid repetition, court coherence. Shape your atoms into one consistent whole. Those are a few hints, I feel, I may give you without offence. Bookmaking is not nearly so difficult an art as most people imagine. If I am any judge of character, you will not drop out thus early in the race." Of course, I thanked him warmly, saying I had no intention to give in yet awhile. But certainly my heart sank very low when I passed out between those endless shelves of published volumes, for the crumbs of comfort seemed so very tiny—the mountain to climb so very high.'

'Never mind, plucky little Nora. You will get to the top of it, with your splendid perseverance. As Mr Lafont says, there is a great deal of knack in writing. As for the public—well, if they don't like us as we are, they must lump it, as we used to say in our nursery days. For my part, I am not an ardent admirer of its tastes, or hypocrite enough to recommend you to fall in with its whims. Keep your own true course, and you'll win over those readers worth having, or my experience is at fault. Now for revelation number two.'

'It is about Cousin Neil,' Nora answered shyly. 'A very singular event has occurred. You may know that since his father died he has enjoyed certain benefits from a small estate in the country—patrimony, I think, it is called—the management of which was entrusted to an agent, the proceeds being vested in trustees for our cousin's absolute advantage. Well, it appears that Colonel Hoskyns has discovered that our kind friend, Mr Foster, who was Neil's guardian, was deceived by this unscrupulous agent, whereby

Neil has been defrauded of a considerable sum of money due to him on his coming of age, a period not far distant. Of course it was not the dear old gentleman's fault, for if eccentric, he was the soul of honesty and uprightness. The colonel has written us that this man was such an adept at deception, that he would have taken him in even, which, if you knew the colonel, you would consider a very clever thing to manage. This agent has now absconded. But, overcome no doubt by remorse at his heartless conduct, he has refunded a large portion of the money, with its accumulated interest, which will all be Neil's at the proper time. But the strangest circumstance is to come. Amongst the papers discovered during the exhaustive inquiry instituted are some very startling documents. These show our cousin's unquestionable claim to no less than—would it be possible for you to imagine?—a Scottish earldom! Does not that furnish material for a romance in real life? It seems that the desire to establish this had lain dormant in the Challoner family for years, poverty having prevented it from putting forward its claims. Neil's parents had purposely, and I think wisely, kept all this from him, so that he might not be discontented, or, as the colonel expresses it, "throw good money after bad." But these obstacles are now in a great measure removed. Counsel's opinion report upon Neil's succession as absolutely certain. It is an extremely complicated affair; more than my feeble brain can altogether follow, although I have had it explained to me fully by the aid of family trees and genealogical tables. As far as I can gather, the title has been wrongfully held for generations by some descendants of the female branch, who will now have

to relinquish the estates in Neil's favour. For, incredible as it may seem, he is the rightful heir. I am assured that very shortly his rights will be established to the satisfaction of everybody, even the lawyers.'

'You amaze me, indeed,' cried Mary. 'Do you mean to say all this has been going on without your telling me a word about it?'

'Yes. We were enjoined to strictest secrecy until everything was clearly proved beyond all possible dispute. Now the veto has been removed, we are at liberty to talk about the matter without reserve. Though I doubt if, in any case, we should have intruded such a purely personal matter upon you of late.'

'One has only to look at your cousin to see he has gentle blood in his veins. I have thought that many a time, though I never imagined such a strange affair as this in the background. An earl! It is indeed extraordinary. And you will be his relatives! Such a humble personage as Mary Stapleton will have to drop out of your list of acquaintances altogether, I expect—'

'Pray do not hint at such a thing, even in jest. When the necessary formalities are got over—we all hope so much that a lawsuit may be avoided—Neil's whole circumstances will be changed, but it will not alter his disposition, if I know him aright. Of course he will leave the city at once. Mr Hossack is to be reinstated as tutor. The two will probably travel for a while, when Neil's presence in England can be dispensed with. This is the present arrangement.'

'And a very attractive one. How did your cousin take the news? *La joie fait peur*, you know, sometimes.'

'It does indeed,' sighed little Nora. 'Shirley and

I were commissioned to prepare him for it ; also for the subsequent important interview which took place at the solicitor's. Singular to relate, when the natural surprise at hearing such an astounding communication was over, his first impulse was to leave the usurpers in undisturbed possession. He said, most modestly, that he would be quite content to remain as he was with us, if we would allow him ; that we might all live so comfortably together with the money which had been thus miraculously recovered, with many other generous propositions which our pride could not possibly permit us to accept. It was only after Shirley had brought home to him how wrong that would be, and how incumbent it is upon everybody to accept the position Providence assigns to them, that he showed any symptoms of changing his mind. Evidently his one great delight was that he could now shake off those city fetters, which have chafed him so long, to follow his poetical aspirations without hindrance. Dear Neil ! It was quite touching to witness the emotion under which he laboured when he grasped the full purport of this remarkable change in his station. His romantic nature reminds me in much of some of Lord Lytton's heroes. I should never be surprised to find him emulating the achievements of young Kenelm Chillingley, for example. I need not add that the whole affair has happened so suddenly, is so very astonishing, that even now we can scarcely realise it. Little did we dream, when we built our castles in the air abroad, how near the truth we really were. Shirley has always insisted that Neil would turn out to be somebody grand, but we never imagined anything so distinguished as this. Already she has commenced to tease him about kilts and bag-

pipes ; speculating as to how he will feel when he sets foot on his native heath ; whether he is quite sure his name is not Macgregor, with other pleasantries. It is marvellous and puzzling in the extreme.'

'It certainly is. But, interested as I am, I really must be off. Shirley will wonder what has become of me.'

'There is just one other trifling matter I should like to mention, if you will bear with me,' Nora whispered, with exceeding bashfulness. 'It is the only secret I have ever withheld from any of you. I will not detain you long.' Mary felt her companion's fingers tremble on her arm. 'It is about myself and—and somebody else.'

'I am all attention. Of course I have your consent to try and guess who that somebody is?'

'That would be quite impossible. So profound is the secret, indeed, even those interested are almost afraid to acknowledge it to themselves. Their hearts guard it so securely.'

'A love romance! This will be delightful.'

'Why, how did you guess that?'

'Well, you see, I am not quite blind. Putting two and two together—'

'Oh, dear! I never dreamt anyone could have conjectured that I had formed an attachment. Surely you cannot have discovered—'

Mary Stapleton laughed.

'Who the happy individual is, you would ask? Have you not heard, miss, that lookers-on see most of the game? Yours was such a simple one to follow. Why, the veriest novice in such investigations would have detected you.'

'You astonish me. I am sure we have been most

careful not to betray ourselves, either in the home circle or before strangers. I am more than amazed at our failure.'

'No doubt you are. The fact is, you overdid your respective parts, as young folks will sometimes under similar circumstances. But you need not be alarmed. There is nothing whatever to be ashamed of. I am sure the match is a suitable one in every respect. How many thousand girls but would jump at such a chance. The Countess Nora! It sounds lovely. What a title for a novel. Take care I do not annex it straight off.'

Miss Wodehouse positively started with alarm as she contemplated the enormity of her conduct.

'The union is not likely to take place for a long while. Indeed, I am quite overwhelmed when I consider the heavy responsibilities it will entail. It would be sad were I to feel myself unequal to support with becoming dignity the various duties thrust upon me, or prove a drag upon my cousin by reason of my bodily infirmities.'

'My dear child, you really will kill me if you go on talking in that deliciously ingenuous fashion. What is there to be afraid of? You are cut out for a countess. Is it such an awful crime to have fallen in love with your handsome cousin during your teens? Come indoors at once. I want to give you a good hug, with any number of kisses and congratulations. So you thought to deceive me, did you, Miss Slyboots? Have I not frequently told you that I am a witch?'

It was on the tip of Mary's tongue to prove her uncanny relationship, by instancing her discovery of the whereabouts of Shirley's affection. But she restrained herself, for her word was pledged over that. Instead, she led Nora off, endeavouring to rouse the little

woman from her state of extreme humility by all the pleasant banter at her command.

‘A real live countess! To begin with, you’ll be presented. “The Countess of”—by-the-bye, who will you be?’

‘Musselburgh, they tell me, is the name of the mansion and estates.’

‘What a droll title. “The Countess of Musselburgh, on her marriage, by”—who shall we say? “The Duchess of Periwinkle,” perhaps. Then you’ll get a gratuitous account of your presentation dress, with an eulogium on your beauty, in the society papers, from the pen of some gushing female who was only present by proxy.’

‘I am quite sure I shall never have the nerve to go to Court, Mary. As for beauty, any pretensions to good looks I may have had at one time have long since disappeared.’

‘That is a matter of opinion. Shirley may run you close, I admit, but hers is of the more robust kind; and it will only be a sister’s rivalry, in which you may yet carry off the palm. But I must not torment our Nollekins any more. Before we go upstairs, I have something special to tell you. When dear Claud is quite convalescent, strong enough to stand the journey, we are going for a lengthened change on the Continent.’

‘I thought you might decide on that,’ said Nora, with a sigh. ‘We shall miss you dreadfully.’

‘Not so much as you may think. In fact, you may have rather more of our company than you bargained for. Because it is arranged that you and Shirley—I have not the courage to ask the future Earl of Musselburgh now—shall come along as well. We have all had quite enough genteel poverty to last out the term

of our natural lives ; we must make up for lost time by enjoying ourselves a bit.'

'I fear it will be quite impossible for us to accept this most generous invitation. Holidays will soon be over, and we shall have to resume our avocations. You must not tempt me to neglect them, Mary.'

'As I said before, my dear, it is all settled, so you will have to submit with a good grace. We are to begin in eastern Brittany, where there is a seaside resort almost rivalling Roussoff in attractions, only of a different type—Salamé-les-Bains. It will be worth braving the twelve hours' passage to set eyes once more on Mademoiselle Marguerite, who keeps the Hôtel Provençal. How she will shout with joy when we take her by storm ! I promised I would bring over a personally-conducted party some day—now I mean to keep my word. She is the stoutest, merriest, withal the most energetic, Bretonne imaginable, Nora, positively brimming over with good-nature, all for eight francs a day, *cidre compris*. If we can only get there for the *fête*, when the charming Salamé boulevard puts on its gala dress, and the bronzed-faced villagers swarm in for their annual games under its nodding trees, the treat will be perfect ; even orthodox Nora will have to forgive its taking place on a Sunday. How anybody can have insulted that spot by erecting the huge, staring, red and white striped hotel and casino, with their cream coloured columns and general obtrusiveness, passes belief. There is a certain satisfaction, however, in knowing that neither of them pay—a judgment on the Administration for tolerating the tables on the very brink of that glorious emerald sea, which might swallow up croupiers and foolish gamblers with one gulp, if it chose. A week of

that delicious air, and the future Countess of Musselburgh will be equal to any number of presentations. There is nothing like Salamé for a thorough change. If you want to go shopping, you can patronise those picturesque shanties labelled "*A la Providence*," "*Au Caprice*," "*Au Figaro Parisiën*," etc., and where most useful things are to be purchased, from terra-cotta nymphs to bathing costumes. Or, if you pine for your compatriots, you can take the steamer across to Leoville-les-Bains, and enjoy their society to your heart's content—only don't ask me to accompany you.'

'From your description, the place must indeed be pretty. Propositions for our enjoyment seem to follow each other with such amazing rapidity as to be quite bewildering. I am sure we do not deserve half the kindnesses our friends propose to lavish upon us. Only this morning I had such a sweet letter from Miss Felinda Turnbull, begging us to visit them at Carnac, where she and her sister are still busy investigating Druidical remains. Of course compliance with the desire would be quite out of the question.'

'I am afraid so. But the dear old souls can join us, if they feel disposed, after they have finished their excavations. I am equal to guiding any number of people through my favourite haunts: every square foot of that prolific land seems remembered. Do not think me sentimental, Nora. But this trip is to be our second, beatified honeymoon. We who are so happy now, so thankful for all the mercies granted to us, must share our happiness with others. Surely we should choose those dear ones whose affection has stood the test of time and adversity? It would be the poorest show of gratitude were it otherwise. Do

not deny us this delight, upon which we have set our minds.'

'As my objections are overruled whenever I raise them,' answered Nora, 'perhaps it is no use my advancing any more. I will consult my sister, and be guided by her advice.'

'A most sensible arrangement, in which, however, you have also been forestalled. No special pleading is necessary in that quarter, for Shirley has been already won over,' laughed Mary. 'She is not nearly so troublesome as another obstinate young lady I could mention. Well, all is capitally arranged at last. When I have induced Miss Cone to join our party, I shall feel quite content. Poor Susie of Danville, Virginia State! I wonder if she is still at loggerheads with her relatives; whether she has mastered the French tongue to her satisfaction. There is an oddity for you, if you like. If you could only pop her bodily into one of your stories, she would sell out one edition at least. Yet, with all her eccentricity, she is as true a friend as ever crossed the Atlantic, or trotted about Europe in a blue veil. If you two don't strike up a violent friendship at first sight, I shall be very much astonished. I am afraid the excitable Amélie is not to be coaxed from her incomparable Roussoff. But I'll try. She would be a decided acquisition, as good as any guide book, for she is a Bretonne by birth. But here we are home again. Just half-a-dozen kisses on account, then to my nursing.'

In the silent watches of the night, Mary sat at the bedside of the husband she had regained—of him who had been won back from shame by a glorious repentance. How peaceful he looked, wrapt in soothing

sleep. What a happy change had come over that face, from which the shade of degradation was lifted—the woman fervently prayed—for ever. What holier picture than this rescue of a human soul from perdition. Assuredly Mary's labour of love had been crowned with joy. Nor was this the only one in that room who had, by God's aid, shaken off the trammels of sin, as Mary Stapleton acknowledged with great humility. For had she not, during the time of her probation, in her callousness and discontent, been tempted to a thousand sinful acts, from which the same protecting Hand had shielded her? What sacrifice could be sufficient—where was the limit of penitence?—for such inestimable mercies vouchsafed?

Thus was the grim shadow which had darkened her Claud's days, and her own, rolling rapidly away, to disclose Peace, with love victorious, behind. How near her husband had been to the shadow of Death she dared not think. But now there were no terrors left, for he had passed within the Holy Shadow of the Cross.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

THERE are perhaps few spots in Europe where the shady side of Anglo-Continental life concentrates itself so definitely as at the many English drinking bars with which Paris abounds. Frequently the proprietor is a turfite, who, finding England inhospitable, has relinquished the comparative dulness of a Boulogne-sur-Mer turf agency for livelier surroundings, and who, as the Honourable Montgomery had done, finds reason to bless the French Republic for its unswerving allegiance to *Le Sport*. Take, as sample of a dozen such establishments, the choice nest, lined—and warmly too—by Mr Thomas Perkins, once of Bolt Court, Fleet Street, whose bar is familiarly known as ‘Tom’s.’

It is situated in a secluded angle not a hundred miles from the great Boulevards.

‘Tom’s’ was not only the house of call for resident sportsmen in the gay capital, but many notabilities of that fraternity, equally at home on Newmarket Heath as at Longchamps, collected there in quest of the very latest tips—seemingly an exhausting search not to be carried on without a plentiful supply of stimulants. ‘Tom’s,’ in many respects, was indeed a Continental

edition of Circe's Crib, with the exception that the horsey element was more pronounced—the hatching of companies unusual. Otherwise, in the drinking capacity of its frequenters, and generally rakish appearance, there was little to choose between them. Perhaps, however, the French establishment could show a better record of lambs shorn by the practised shearers of the turf than even Frontin's. Altogether, it was about as vicious a resort (under the air of external respectability) to be found in Paris, which is no slight compliment to pay.

That Mr Henry Wodehouse, when not acting as decoy-duck for the necessitous widow beyond the barrier, was a constant patron of this 'corner shop' goes without saying. It is difficult to shake off old associations, and the ex-promoter was strictly conservative in his habits. Besides, those to be met there were such congenial spirits, stirring up memories of other and more prosperous reunions elsewhere.

Henry has gone downhill sadly of late. In his adversity, we must not begrudge him any enjoyment derived from his midnight chats with Mr Perkins, whose throat—the result, no doubt, of excessive bawling and exposure in the pursuit of his late choice profession—was in such a chronic state of huskiness as to require much lubrication, and whose forecasts were wont to become rather mixed towards the small hours.

But there must be a limit even to the persistent ill-luck which has attended Mr Wodehouse throughout his career. Most commoners would endure a good deal to be privileged to take up the paper one fine morning and there discover that one's nephew has unexpectedly come into a title. At anyrate, a para-

graph to that effect met Henry's astonished vision in none other than the journal whose items of intelligence he, as a rule, so thoroughly despised. Who would not forgive a rival much on the faith of so comforting an announcement? Sceptical as he was, Mr Wodehouse saw no reason to doubt its accuracy, for it was copied from a well-known London contemporary, whose fashionable chronicler enjoyed an exceptional reputation for veracity.

'What an astounding circumstance,' mused Uncle Henry, when he had feasted his eyes for some time upon that attractive paragraph. 'I will write the dear boy at once to offer my felicitations. Somehow, though we may have had our little tiffs in the past, I always had a sneaking regard for that lad, he's so honest, and—ahem!—simple. What a name to head a prospectus! It really is providential that he has a relative with so many good things on his list to prevent him from squandering his money or falling into the clutches of Moses & Co. There's that Digger's Mine, the very investment for a few stray hundreds, and as safe as—well, most things in this corrupt world. I'll write his youthful lordship at once,' which Mr Wodehouse accordingly did. If the spelling of his effusion was not perfect, his congratulations were nevertheless absolutely sincere. 'I consider that's neatly put. Master Neil ought to come done handsomely to his poor old nunky on the strength of it, for he's had hard raps, enough and to spare. If those girls of mine hadn't behaved so stingily, I might be living in clover now, instead of jogging along in this beastly hand-to-mouth fashion. It's as clear as day the boy ought to make immediate provision for me, if he's got a spark of gratitude left in him. Hope he

won't let the females work on his feelings, though, or they'll spoil the whole business.' Mr Wodehouse added a few touches to his letter to meet that dismal contingency. 'Fancy the delicate allusion to former kindnesses received ought to fetch him—be as good as an annuity, in fact, unless my capabilities of persuasion are extinct.'

It was with quite a renewal of sprightliness that Henry presented himself at the 'corner shop' that evening. Needless to say, he made much capital out of his recently acquired connection with the aristocracy, or that the link helped to raise him considerably in the estimation of his fellows. Even at this early stage, he contrived, on the strength of his expectations, to negotiate a loan sufficient to relieve pressing requirements. Further, it enabled him to finish up the night royally at Mabile—a mode of discounting possibilities quite typical of Mr Wodehouse's sanguine temperament.

For his companion in his treat he had our old acquaintance the Honourable Montgomery, now, unfortunately, more down on his luck than even his once affluent colleague. Indeed Mr Spooner had been compelled to come abroad during an unpleasant period of suspension following upon a not altogether satisfactory whitewashing. He had also had to undergo much unkindly censure as to the management of his affairs at the hands of some 'meddling old registrar, who, I'll wager, couldn't tell a single good point about a gee-gee, don't you know.' In fairness to this functionary, it must, however, be admitted that the bankrupt had failed to pass his examination with that *éclat* to be expected from so expert a bookmaker. It only wanted the gifted paragraphist, Mr Rushworth,

to complete the jovial trio. But he was many leagues away, pursuing even a more exciting, if not hazardous, calling than when attached to the staff of the 'Pilot.' For he was serving in the Cape Mounted Rifles.

'Never mind, old boy, I shall be rich enough some day,' was Mr Spooner's consoling reflection. 'Can't make out what's made the gov'nor cut up so rusty. Thought he'd clear me again all right; what's a few thou's to him? Awful bore, though, having one's allowance docked. Paris such a beastly expensive city if one goes the pace at all. By the way, you might fork over that pony I lent you last year. You're the coolest hand, bar none, at excuses I've ever met.'

'Pony, my dear fellow! You shall have a cageful of monkeys presently, if you'll only exercise a little more patience,' cried Mr Wodehouse recklessly. 'Had a grand stroke of luck this morning. Always told you I'd got blue blood in my veins—don't I look like it?'

Then he imparted the extraordinary news which had acted as magic on his impaired energies—a disclosure the Honourable Montgomery, accustomed as he was to overnight ebullitions of the sensational, imaginary kind, received with a discouraging lack of enthusiasm.

'Yes, I shall be a swell soon, and no error, so look out for squalls, my pippin.' In his glee Mr Wodehouse playfully dug his companion in the ribs. 'I've held pretty bad cards up to now, but this trump's worth waiting for. What are you looking so glum about? Can't be a case of sour grapes with you, anyhow. Not a bad joke that, eh?'

'Fancy it is a case—with this stuff—shouldn't recommend you to try any more, unless you want a head on you to-morrow. Well, I'm off. Bye-bye, ta-ta, my frolicsome yearling. Why not try a caper

at the Rotunda? It might work off some of your superfluous spirits, don't you know.'

'Horsey young idiot. Let those laugh who win, Mr Spooner,' muttered Henry, not unnaturally nettled at this ill-timed levity. 'Keep your precious slang for somebody else, or I may make it warm for you.'

Mr Wodehouse strolled round and smashed a few egg-shells at the rifle gallery, inwardly wishing that he was aiming at Mr Spooner's head, which he considered about as empty.

'Must think me an ass to swallow that gammon,' soliloquised the Honourable Montgomery, as he passed out of those brilliant gardens, with their thousand and one charms, ten thousand extra lamps. 'Nice notion, that broken-down screw trying to back into our stable. Why, he'd want to knock us down, pedigrees and all, to the highest bidder. Never knew a feller so keen after the ready in all my experience. Only he don't care to part himself. Never met his equal in that line either.'

Henry waited with exemplary patience for the shower of gold which he considered ought to result from his communication to his nephew. But week after week passed without any sign, which was, to say the least of it, inconvenient. He began to think this lordling's brain must have been turned; or, worse still, that he had fallen under that 'confounded petticoat rule,' which was a form of government Mr Wodehouse especially abominated. To add to his worries, he got unmercifully twitted, not only at 'Tom's,' but at the boarding-house, where he was under contract to be ready at all hours with the latest gossip for the edification of the guests. It was part of the bargain concluded with the proprietress that, however low-

spirited he might feel, he was to be gay and entertaining, which was an ever-present sword of Damocles over the unfortunate Henry's head. It said much for the ex-promoter's gameness that, tried as he was, his anecdotes lost none of their point or richness.

'Were I a beetle, I verily believe that woman would like to stick a pin through me, and gloat over my agonies,' this disappointed man had once confided to a fellow-lodger, also temporarily doomed to mortgage his force of humour to his hostess, as set-off against a cash settlement of arrears. 'It's perfectly revolting to have to sell oneself body and soul to such a skinflint, to say nothing of the wear and tear of constitution, to be lively with an empty pocket. What do you say to a strike?' At which proposal his comrade had laughed, replying that he was too deeply involved to risk such a stroke for freedom.

When more than a month had passed, and still the future peer did not respond to his uncle's piteous appeals for assistance, Mr Wodehouse relapsed into his previous state of grumbling, from which he was only roused at meal-times by a recollection of the awful consequences which would follow the non-fulfilment of his bargain. Nor had he the consolation of venting his ill-temper upon the youths at the club. For, sad to tell, he had been hammered in the *Chaussée d'Antin* for not paying his subscription. There really seemed nothing for it but flight. Henry's instincts of self-preservation pointed to Jersey, where he believed the laws in regard to refugees were lenient—he knew brandy and cigars were cheap there. With a return of prosperity, he could easily slip across to St Malo, re-entering the country, with all its faults, he loved so dearly. Of course the Brittany port could not offer such diversions as this

Pearl of Cities. But even there, he had heard, was scope for his particular talents, with near at hand—entrancing prospect—a casino, where the delights of gambling by the seashore could be indulged in throughout the livelong night, if he could only manage to gain admittance into that charmed *Cercle*. He might have to reconcile himself to a residence in the slow suburb of St Servan, for economy's sake. But no doubt he would find a few pigeons ripe for plucking to make amends for the infliction. If he settled in a pension, perhaps the lady's views as to a contra would not be so stringent.

The reader may wonder why one so gentle and forgiving as Neil Challoner should have disregarded Mr Wodehouse's appeals. Had he followed his own impulses, he would have at once sent money for the relief of his relative, thereby making himself a prey to the attentions of a parasite for the remainder of his days. Fortunately he first consulted his solicitor, to whose detested clutches Henry had perforce been obliged to entrust his missives. He persuaded his client not to open up negotiations with his uncle at any price. (How these sharks systematically stood in the path of Mr Wodehouse's advancement.) Neil did not breathe a word to his cousins on this subject, for he knew it would only grieve them to find their father resorting once more to these paltry artifices even he, in his generosity, found it difficult to excuse, when he remembered how shamefully a parent had neglected his children. However, after another tirade, when the whole gamut of epistolary, if illiterate, persuasiveness must have been exhausted, Neil decided that he could not remain silent any longer. Accordingly, always at the lawyer's instigation, he wrote, without disclos-

ing his whereabouts, offering his uncle a weekly allowance, which, he was told, was the only safe plan when dealing with one whose morals were so elastic in money matters. Perhaps it was well the two were not witnesses of the effect their proposal produced, or came within range of the explosives hurled at their innocent heads.

'A potty dole, as if I was some miserable crossing-sweeper. What mean hounds they must be. I revoke every word I've uttered in that lad's favour—he's a screw, born and bred. A beggarly allowance, with fortune staring me in the face, if I can only plank down the needful. It's enough to take the wind out of any poor devil's sails. Here have I been obliged to pinch and screw to make two ends meet, whilst that conceited young cub— Bah, it's sickening. What's to be done? I'd like to send back the letter, marked "disgusted," only they might leave me out in the cold, with nothing at all, which wouldn't be quite convenient just now. Fact is, I'm fairly stumped. Suppose I shall have to pocket my feelings; but it's deuced hard on a fellow. I'll have one more shot at 'em. Whatever happens, I think I'll give Jersey a turn. Paris is awfully stuffy, and old Thomas as close as wax with his coin now he finds I'm a bit pinched. After all this bother, I want a change. If I don't deserve one, nobody does.'

That evening the boarders remarked how their entertainer was in his very happiest mood, his caustic utterances provoking infinite merriment. But it was only a brilliant flash to finish up with. Could it have been to throw his hostess off the scent? Perish the thought. Anyway, to the surprise, and possible disappointment of some, our friend did not appear at the

dinner-table next day. The widow, looking pale and somewhat glum, informed her select company that she was told Mr Wodehouse had been called away suddenly to the south of Europe, 'on urgent private business, which brooked no delay'—an announcement, strange to relate, accepted by the diners with more or less incredulity and a few suggestive coughs. Considering the traveller was such a prime favourite with them, this behaviour was scarcely Christianlike. But the world is so prone to be uncharitable.

CHAPTER VIII.

'FOR EVER AND EVER?'

LITTLE Nora was quite right when she said that Mr Hossack was likely to undergo some novel experiences in the new abode he had chosen. In fact, they proved unique enough to have furnished materials for half-a-dozen romances from the dullest of pens.

It would be idle to say that the contrast between the peaceful Hampstead cottage and this central, very busy mansion was at first otherwise than extremely marked: the change, you see, was so violent. But, assuredly, if Robert sought distraction, with a possible salve to his emotions, in extremes, he could not have found a more suitable residence than this high-class pension conducted by Miss Crossly, whose name was, of course, a gross libel on her disposition. How this remarkable person contrived, single-handed, to regulate the intricate machinery of Peckmore's from year's end to year's end evoked the admiration of all save the most confirmed grumbler. Obviously she was a born organiser and diplomatist. Miss Crossly was certainly a 'character,' and as such deserves more than a passing notice.

To manage a high-class pension with success requires undeniable tact, with ability of no mean order. Such a happy combination must have been reached

in the person of Miss Crossly, whose resources, under every conceivable emergency, was a thing to dream about, but not often to encounter in this world. Indeed, it was handed down in the annals of Peckmore's, to her lasting credit, that she had once stood ankle-deep in water—the result of that bane of ratepayers, a pipe burst through the frost—encouraging her forces, with a resignation and presence of mind beyond all praise or rivalry.

In regulating her establishment, Miss Crossly followed the strictest lines of order and discipline. Patrons and domestics alike, for the most part, instinctively caught the example of its ruling spirit, whereby if Peckmore's did not become a model of respectability, decorum and punctuality, it was certainly not the fault of its proprietress. There were not a few whose allegiance to that house of many storeys amply proved the wisdom of Miss Crossly's arrangements. Of course, amongst so cosmopolitan a collection, dissatisfied visitors appeared, who found the English language deficient in adjectives to express their disapproval of her management. Such ill-natured remarks were, however, not worth consideration by the enlightened. When an echo of such complaints found their way craftily, although doubtless with intent, to Miss Crossly's ears, through a third party—Robert discovered, as a curious feature of boarding-house life, that few things were ever done or said openly—the lady would smile placidly upon her informant, and speak somewhat after this wise,—

'My dear, after keeping a place of this kind so many years as I have done, that sort of attack has about as much effect upon my sensibilities as a pellet on the hide of an elephant. There's no pleasing

everybody. The malcontents have always one never-failing remedy. If not satisfied, they can depart elsewhere; there are scores of other private hotels in the parish. "Joy go with them and sixpence," say I. I am a woman of business, my terms are considered reasonable, and I endeavour to act up to my engagements. I keep as liberal a table as the dearness of provisions, and the oppression of an overtaxed city, will permit—here it is in black and white in the advertisement. That's fair enough, in all conscience. I flatter myself I carry out my part of the contract. As for any little crotchets of mine—I own I'm sharp-tongued at times—surely they might be pardoned, when the onerous nature of my responsibilities is considered. Were I to allow myself to be worried with half the sly digs aimed at me, I should have grizzled myself into fiddlestrings long ago. Bless me'—Miss Crossly would pat her day-book affectionately—'if I wanted to be nasty, I could pick out a hundred people from this record whose achievements in the way of detraction are unequalled. What a gold mine, also, this book would be to the conscientious chronicler! In these days of reminiscences, why should the long-suffering manageress be forgotten? The confessions of a Buddhist, or even a Thug, would be feeble compared with such revelations. You will scarcely believe it, perhaps, but I have actually had people revile me—behind my back, as usual—because some of their neighbours were not quite hall-marked, as if my terms included a guarantee for everybody's respectability! I call that coming it rather too strong—don't you? On the whole, however, we are a wonderfully harmonious family. We ought to be all quite happy now I've got my wine licence. The colds I've caught

with that front door open, to comply with these bothering magistrates' rules, I'd be sorry to mention. Why on earth Peckmore's should have been refused, when the Welpole and Cheetah's Private have it, passes my comprehension.'

This was a long-standing grievance of Miss Crossly's against the authorities. It had been a red-letter day, indeed, for this estimable provider when she saw a certain short but invaluable notice inscribed over her portals. Evil-minded people had prophesied she would never get it. They had even sneered at the picture of the faultless barouches, with their prancing steeds, which, on the frontispiece of Miss Crossly's brochure—setting forth the advantages of her residence, and in particular its centrality—enlivened Mannteufel Street, all in the act of drawing up at Peckmore's to discharge any number of affluent boarders. But jealousy was so clearly at the bottom of such taunts, that they could only be treated with the contempt they deserved. Persons who could call Miss Crossly grasping, because she looked carefully after a settlement of accounts from those whose morals were easy in that direction, would say anything. If it is grasping to insist upon one's own, when honestly due, there must be many of us open to such reproaches. If Miss Crossly had not quite succeeded in making Peckmore's an elysium for the sojourner, she had done her best, and should therefore have earned the eternal gratitude of the globe-trotter. A woman who can be equally at home with an omnibus-load of Americans, taken in *en bloc* on inclusive terms, 'doing Europe' after their own matchless fashion, as with a Japanese *attaché*, surely deserves well of the roving public.

Was it her fault that envy, hatred and malice, at

times crept in at her hospitable door, or that mankind's evil propensities broke out into ill-natured gossip? Robert remarked, also, that such vices as jealousy, spitefulness, calumny, with other manifold phases of backbiting, were not unknown inside Peckmore's. He did not care to believe, as one experienced traveller had confided to him, that 'they're all alike, hot-beds of scandal; nobody's character is safe in them. The poison of asps is under their lips, sir. I've proved it.' But there certainly was a tendency on the part of some to indulge in ungenerous criticisms concerning their neighbour's doings. Indeed, the atmosphere of Peckmore's seemed to have quite an alterative effect upon many of its patrons. Robert made the acquaintance of some, to all appearances, delightful people outside, who developed the most unexpected capabilities for maliciousness when once fairly installed within. The disease took a dangerous form; for whilst ignoring their own frailties, the patients imputed the most selfish, discreditable motives to others. This certainly was a most singular phenomenon, and, not without alarm, did Robert contemplate how easily one could fall under the mysterious thralldom. What if he also caught the infection? Should he pack up his traps at once, and fly before the spell began its work? No, that would be cowardly. He must still endeavour not to allow his belief in humanity to be shaken by these unhealthy examples. Rather, to hope for opportunities to combat the disease with all the resolution of which he was capable. Robert did not know that to attempt to purge a boarding-house of scandal was about as difficult an operation as to count the sands upon the sea-shore. But he was not easily daunted. Being a firm believer in the exist-

ence of good in everybody, he meant to accept cheerfully the task he had taken upon himself. When the chance offered, he must show these people into what a sorry, undignified state they were drifting; he must turn the mirror upon themselves; see if their better natures could not be awakened to the naughtiness of their behaviour—a charitable intent, quite on a par with Miss Wodehouse’s crusade against intemperance. And about as thankless.

It was the busy season at Peckmore’s when Robert went there, so he had a first-rate opportunity for studying the various peculiarities of cosmopolitan life offered by a high-class pension in London. Indeed, Miss Crossly had often to turn customers away for lack of accommodation, which was an act of discourtesy she felt sadly. How she contrived to put up with the fads of those she already lodged was a marvel. But there seemed no limit to her endurance in this respect. Had the housing capacities of Peckmore’s been expanded in proportion to her generosity, Mannteufel Street itself could scarcely have sheltered her flock. During the first few weeks of his visit, Robert was planted out from the general company, at a table apart, with three Americans, who enjoyed about as good an opinion of themselves and their country as any trio he had ever come across. In his modesty, our friend would willingly have retired, leaving the field open for someone more inclined to argument than himself. But this was not to be. So Robert had to endure quite a fortnight’s penance, and exercise a considerable amount of self-control during the ordeal. He was willing to concede, for the sake of peace, that in the matter of oysters his neighbours might beat ‘all creation.’ But it was rather too much to ask him

to accept without protest the assertion that only America spoke the English language in its native purity, his own countrymen being relegated to quite a back seat. Those whose unhappy lot it may have been to endeavour to convince an American will sympathise with Robert. They will also understand his feelings when he found one morning that his neighbours had carried their boastfulness and jarring twang across the Channel. With their departure he got promoted to more congenial society at meal-times.

It was an edifying study to look round that table and note the varied types of humanity collected from nearly every quarter of the globe. It was equally instructive to note the tact with which Miss Crossly, who naturally presided, set the conversational ball rolling when it threatened to stop, and kept an eagle eye on the doings of her domestics, whilst trying her utmost to promote harmony and loving-kindness amongst her guests. Without fuss or flurry, this remarkable woman almost accomplished the feat of doing two things at once. When the presidential bell at her elbow tinkled, it was not to command silence, but as an indication to her major-domo that something had gone wrong with the ordering of the repast, the slip being often rectified with just a bend of Miss Crossly's classic head. The functionary was, in a reverse sense, more inappropriately named than his mistress; for he was called Joy. A more mute-like person it would be difficult to find. He was a man of few words and many growls, when, for example, the neat-handed Phyllises under his control ruffled his temper by any trifling, and often excusable, lapse into hilarity. It was whispered by the ungenerous that

Miss Crossly possessed some terrible hold upon this mournful steward, whereby his spirit had been broken, he himself reduced to a fretful, non-salaried state of allegiance. But this was, of course, only another of those calumnies which the proprietress knew so well how to treat with sublime indifference. Whilst on this subject, it may be mentioned that Peckmore's was quite a palace of misnomers. As instances, there was a most amiable planter from Jamaica, who rejoiced in the unlovely patronymic of Byles. Likewise an old lady with a name suggestive of the angels, whose capabilities in the direction of spitefulness led one to devoutly hope that the kinship was illusive—for the sake of the angels. This was the same madame who, on the strength of a prolonged residence abroad, always delivered herself at breakfast, in indifferent French, of the sentence, '*Donnez moi un œuf, garçon,*' which Robert thought quite an unnecessary infliction on the company, as well as an unfair tax on the waiter's risible faculties at so early an hour.

The chief topic of conversation at Peckmore's was of travel, with its many pleasures, drawbacks and adventures. This was but natural, considering the cosmopolitan crew assembled there, although to some such a theme must have become rather monotonous. Miss Crossly found therein a ready excuse as to why she herself rarely took a change.

'You see,' she would explain to anybody particularly pertinacious on the subject, 'I hear so much about the Continent, and foreign ways, that it's almost as good as a visit, without the bother or expense. Between ourselves, I get rather sick of the constant chatter about trains, hotel bills and scenery. As for those American cottage trunks, they're the bane of

my existence. Besides—you'll pardon my apparent rudeness—my real holiday comes when business at Peckmore's is slack. You can't imagine what a paradise it is then, although only a brief one, for I begin to fill up again in October. Bless me, few people know what a sweet place London is during the off-season, when marketing is a treat, with the tradespeople only too anxious to oblige. What do you want nicer than Kensington Gardens or the Regent Park, when the skylarking nursery-maids are out of town with the rest—and their perambulators, too, thank goodness? I did try a fortnight once at Margate, with my sister, who keeps a boarding-house on the Fort. But I worried myself so over the management and cooking, that my holiday did me more harm than good. After that experiment, I decided London was the best place for me.' To the rash inquiry as to whether she did not find it rather dull, Miss Crossly replied almost hotly: 'Dull, indeed, with nearly thirty bedrooms to be turned inside out, dozens of winter curtains and valances put up, to say nothing of scrubbing, painting and whitewashing! There's not much dulness about any of us, I can tell you. Still, it's fascinating work. Besides, it reminds us how soon we shall see you all back again,' Miss Crossly added, as a corrective to anything too outspoken she might have uttered. 'No, I'm a born Londoner, and it's lucky I am. It would never do for me to be gallivanting about, with Peckmore's at the mercy of a lot of giddy servants and workpeople. There's no knowing what rigs they might not be up to. Perhaps if—if I wasn't quite alone in the world, things might be different. Heigh-ho, but they are not, so it's no use grizzling'—a lament which caused an elderly and, until then, permanently dis-

posed bachelor to turn pale and leave next day to test the qualities of the waters at Harrogate.

Whatever Miss Crossly might think of the flow of Continental talk, to Robert it acted as a strong, if tantalising, restorative. He loved travel. The few trips abroad he had been able to make only whetted his appetite for more. To him it was as a refreshing whiff of sea and mountain air; equally pleasant was the interchange of foreign experiences. His spirits revived, his ambition became stimulated afresh. He found therein a much needed relief from the perpetual strain of doubt in respect of Shirley Wodehouse, under which he groaned. Health and nerves were beginning to suffer, as the readiness of his pen had done. The intercourse with his fellow-creatures, a study of their joys and sorrows—for Robert, peeping under the mask most of us wear before the world, read many a grief silently, nobly endured—roused his flagging manhood from that dangerous inertness into which of late it had been disposed to drift.

Ever since that memorable evening when he had walked home with Mr Ferguson after the hospital dinner, Robert had been in a state of agonised uncertainty as to how matters stood between this young divine and Shirley. Clearly the curate was in love with the songstress. Every time her name was mentioned, he stammered and blushed profusely. More than once Robert thought he was on the eve of confessing his affection to him, which would indeed have been embarrassing. But did Shirley love the curate? Had there been any declaration? Was there a tacit understanding between the two? Those were a few of the vital points which harassed this diffident novelist. He was inclined to think that

nothing had been said. Shirley detested every form of concealment so thoroughly, that Robert felt sure her open nature would revolt at anything clandestine. Again, supposing she did return Mr Ferguson's attachment, and were eating out her heart in silent misery, even as he himself was doing for her dear sake? Oh, for the opportunity to spare one human being a tithe of the suffering it had been his fate to undergo! If he could only render her some service, testify his devotion by some knightly act, he thought he might be happy. But to continue thus, tongue-tied, inactive, was terrible. At times—many people feel like this, but get over it—he thought the suspense must kill him. He was foolish enough even to imagine that his heart was breaking, as if unrequited love, or grief, or any earthly reverse, could accomplish such a thing. And this was the man who had vowed to himself that he could never love again!

Such was Robert's unenviable state during the first few weeks of his visit to Peckmore's. But with healthier employment for his mind, allied with a courageous determination to mix more with his fellow-men, came renewed vigour of body and intellect. At last he saw clearly how he had been wrong in not declaring his passion, thus condemning himself and—might he dare suspect?—another to all the tortures of desolation and despair. He would know his fate before another sun went down.

Just as Robert had decided upon this bold step, there came that astounding news concerning his former pupil and ever-constant friend, Nevill Challoner. This earnest, sensitive young poet, with the soft, dreamy eyes, who was serving his employers in a branch of life he disliked exceedingly, was actually an earl in

disguise! It was indeed an astonishing piece of intelligence, before which Robert forgot even his recently made resolution, as he sat amazed beyond measure.

It took him some time to realise what this change would mean. No difference of station could ever affect that bond of union which had sprung up between the two. But there was the grim fact that suddenly Neil was moved into a totally different sphere, to which he was entitled—one which he would assuredly grace. There was a touch of sadness, though not of envy, as the man foresaw how the very event, bringing, he presumed, wealth and happiness, must interfere with the freedom of intercourse hitherto enjoyed. However unchanged their feelings might remain, this seemed to Robert inevitable: the ways of peer and humble scribbler must of necessity lie wide apart. How, too, would these new conditions suit Neil's shy, imaginative temperament? It might, after all, not prove an unmixed joy to be thus translated into another highly responsible position. Robert had no misgivings as to Neil's fitness, or that he would allow personal inclinations to interfere with his acceptance or fulfilment of the duties thrust upon him. But in this very sacrifice was there not danger of finding no real contentment? The germs of his talent were unmistakably present; how grievous it would be were they to remain, by force of circumstances, undeveloped. Robert would far rather Neil remained as he was, than run the risk of thwarting his ambitious. What if this pure-minded lad became corrupted by contact with the gay, well-born, too often brainless, class whose tastes and exploits the writer held mostly in small esteem? He did not like to believe that contamina-

tion was possible, yet the mere possibility of it provoked a sincere feeling of alarm. There was one great safeguard. Neil, whatever happened, must always remain within touch of his cousins, who had woven themselves since boyhood into his very life; they would not fail him now when so much strength was needed. Had not Robert felt, in his own person, how goodness spreads, to fortify and soothe everything within its reach with a mysterious, indefinable supremacy? How much more so, then, must one who had always come under such gentle example be strengthened against temptation? Neil could never be happy for long, separated from Nora and Shirley Wodehouse. Thus would the invisible wings of their protection and presence be always spread over him, to his constant benefit.

There was one unclouded cause for gratitude in this remarkable dispensation. Neil would be able to free himself for ever from the oppression which had held him down till now. He would certainly at once leave Messrs Sharp & Argent's employ, with it the vulgarity and indecent haste after wealth which characterised most of the transactions in Achilles Passage: no doubt he had left already. Although he had always tried to make light of his grievances, Robert knew the surroundings to be something more than distasteful to him. When he recounted the many eccentric freaks of his colleagues—those lively young gentlemen, who smoked, betted, and, he shrewdly suspected, not unfrequently drank more than was good for them, during business hours—the least discerning must have perceived how Neil's feelings had been outraged. It was perfectly clear that nothing could ever have reconciled him to the din and worldliness of the Stock Exchange. Notwithstanding, he had been altogether patient and

uncomplaining throughout his probation. Now this quite unexpected reward had come. It only remained to be seen whether the rank and riches would make or mar his future. Robert held to his belief that all would be well. He could scarcely be mistaken in his estimate of such a character. He had made it a labour of love to watch its many varied lights and shades. A highly interesting study it had proved.

Imagine, therefore, Robert's delight when, following close upon the announcement he had seen in a newspaper, came Neil's own confirmation of it. Not only was the pleasant suggestion thrown out that they should resume their former relations—"take up the links of his education where they had been dropped," as Neil so delicately put it—but it was proposed the two should travel together, on the old footing, into lands Robert had never, in his wildest dreams, dared hope to visit, until Neil came into full legal possession of his rights, which would not be for some time yet.

'I have been to Musselburgh Hall,' its prospective owner wrote, 'and, though a noble place, rambling and roomy, find it has been sadly neglected. So have its broad acres, where a ruthless destruction of timber has taken place which is quite pitiable. I am told that it will require much economy and careful management to "nurse the estate"—I think that was the expression used. At present the house is scarcely habitable; crop and pasture-land also present a most impoverished appearance. In a word, the whole property has been allowed to run to seed. Colonel Hoskyns was very angry with "those rascally usurpers," as he terms them, for allowing so historic a house to fall into such decay. Indeed, I think he would have called the late occupiers seriously to account, had I not

restrained him—I am so anxious that everything should be settled amicably, if possible. I fear, however, lawyers are not always peace-makers. Now, you must know, my dear Mr Hossack, that although not precisely poor, I shall certainly not be rich. After thinking the matter over very carefully, I have decided that it would be quite wrong to patch up matters. It will be better to look things in the face at once, retrench during my minority, so as to enter into possession of, at anyrate, an unencumbered inheritance. Do you not agree with me? England is not a country lending itself readily to retrenchment. My thoughts naturally turn to the Continent we are both so fond of. It will indeed be nice if you see your way to fall in with my notions. Of course I must not lose sight of Nora and Shirley. Indeed, I think they have equally strong claims upon me as the Musselburgh acres, and will be, I assure you, a much pleasanter encumbrance. Curiously enough, they have also arranged a trip—into Western France—with brave Mrs Stapleton and her husband, who is now happily recovered. I imagine that, when we return from our grand tour, it will be possible to unite forces in some quiet Norman or Breton city for the winter. This is my idea, although any plans are as yet only in their infancy, and dependent on the will of others. Your decision will help us so much. Pray let it be prompt, and in the affirmative.'

Then Neil went on to touch a very tender subject, one which he evidently thought would astonish his friend vastly. But it only provoked a smile and merry twinkle of the eye from Mr Hossack. In a refreshingly ingenuous fashion he laid bare his feelings towards little Nora, whom he vowed he had loved

since the happy days when they had picnicked together in the woods round Dresden, and asserting—as many had done before, and will continue to until the crack of doom—that his devotion would never, never change. Now there was no need to keep the matter secret. It never entered Neil's unsuspecting head that anybody could possibly have found them out. For his part, he evidently considered he had been an arch deceiver throughout the entire business, affording another instance of how remarkably blind love is. Now the whole world might know his choice.

This remarkable frankness brought Robert's thoughts quickly back once more to the peril he was running anent his own concerns. What if some less scrupulous suitor came forward and snatched Shirley Wodehouse from him? He had almost persuaded himself that, if her happiness, which was his constant solicitude, could be assured thereby, he might reconcile himself to her union with Mr Ferguson. For, if somewhat mincing in manner, he was an honest, upright gentleman, as well as a hard-working curate. But was he to be outdone by this boy, Nevill, of not twenty summers, who had already wooed and won? It was clear that Neil could do more than accept wisely and gracefully the purple mantle which was destined to fall upon his shoulders. Here was proof positive of his ability to teach Robert a lesson in worldly wisdom, by not allowing his happiness to be jeopardised by an excessive diffidence passing all bounds of reason. By neglecting this call, he might be laying up for himself a store of incalculable wretchedness in the future. Thus the very circumstance which had so suddenly raised Neil in the social scale might prove a godsend to the novelist. It was evident the cousin to an earl in embryo could never

continue giving singing lessons. Nor, he thought, would Shirley's pride willingly permit her to accept alms from the same quarter. Here, then, was Robert's golden opportunity to step in and offer his support. His present earnings, with what he had managed to put by, were considerable. He had, moreover, concluded bargains with a firm of fiction purveyors, which, given health and a facile pen, would bring substantial recompense in the future. So that even his morbid anxiety lest he should drag a wife down with him into penury might safely be dismissed. Robert would be up and doing without delay. Possibly he might catch Neil at Hampstead. If so, achieve a double purpose. The first, one of congratulation ; the second, that errand the contemplation of which put his heart in such a flutter. Even such trite yet forcible maxims as 'All's fair in love,' etc., 'Faint heart never won,' and so forth, failed to offer him a grain of material comfort.

Hurrying forth, with his intention full upon him, Robert encountered Miss Crossly, who had just donned her trailing garments of the night for dinner, and possible conquest. It must be admitted that amongst those weaknesses for which she sought condonation was a pronounced partiality for smart attire. That evening she had put on her customary plush gown, her fingers sparkled with brilliants, her coiffure was a fuzzy marvel. That there were scoffers, who disparagingly contrasted the lady's appearance with the somewhat poverty-stricken air of the Peckmore coal-scuttles and water-cans, goes without saying. Nor did they stick at indulging in covert, ill-natured sneers at those harmless loo parties which, rumour affirmed, took place in Miss Crossly's sanctum when the toils of the day were over, invitations being alone extended

to her primest favourites. What a detestable vice is envy. What a vile aspersion it also was to hint that she measured her liking for her guests in proportion to the length of their purses! But perhaps the directress's most marked peculiarity was a rooted aversion to her boarders absenting themselves from meals. She took such distinct pains to produce a daily bill of fare—in her opinion equal to, if not surpassing, many a club repast—that she magnified a neglect of her viands into quite a personal affront. She probably followed the same lines which led her to reason sharply with her servants that because she rarely took a holiday herself, they could not possibly require one. But was it just that offended boarders should insinuate she was a ‘nigger-driver’ in consequence? Who would not keep a high-class pension! Miss Crossly's unflinching rejoinder to any complaint concerning things edible was that ‘what was good enough for her, was surely good enough for others’—certainly an independent, if not venturesome, line of action to adopt towards a paying community. She was likewise a great stickler for accuracy in grammar, in particular priding herself on the correctness of her menu. This—here again the slanderer's tongue—was a fad carried to a pedantic pitch. Woe betide any rash lodger who dared dispute the spelling of sundry items, for Miss Crossly was backed by a whole army of authorities. She also carried her ideas of pronunciation to extremes, when conversing with her foreign patrons, emphasising every syllable as if instructing a child, some even insinuated, an imbecile. No doubt those strangers were extremely grateful; let us hope they benefited by the instruction. In any case, it was a happier form of treatment than snapping her lodgers’

heads off, which was a feat Miss Crossly often attempted. As her guests were luckily always more or less on the defensive—generally more—the danger of the performance was lessened. The lady herself acknowledged that she was sharp of tongue. Open confession is, we know, good for the soul. She was therefore presumably absolved from much. Whether the absolution extended so far as to excuse neglect of her persuasion—Miss Crossly was a Jewess—on the plea that she was mostly too busy to look after it, is a subject for conjecture. Her faith being—also by her own admission—economically condensed into that admirable resolve, ‘Do unto others as you would be done by,’ perhaps she was exempted, presuming she put her theory into practice, which some miserable detractors hinted she did not. Whose character was proof against such outrageous calumnies? They would say next, Miss Crossly possessed neither conscience nor religion; that she bullied her domestics, set up the god money, and worshipped it; was meddling, inquisitive, domineering. In short, it was difficult to say what obloquies they would not indulge in. Do all of us parade our good deeds before the world? Oh, these coiners of scandal; these clippers of reputation!

Knowing the lady's views on the subject of desertion, Robert was quite prepared for an admonitory shake of the bejewelled finger, with the accompanying reproof, ‘Out again, Mr Hossack; I sigh’—Miss Crossly always pronounced say in this manner—‘it's really too bad. Such an excellent dinner provided, too. I really shall have to charge you extra if you play the truant like this. I do believe you're going love-making. Deny it if you can’—a divination which quite paralysed poor Robert's

powers of retort. ‘Well, I suppose, under the circumstances, we must excuse you. Of course we may all count upon invitations to the wedding?’ This forecast only added coals of fire to Robert’s discomfiture.

On the knifeboard of the omnibus which drew him slowly northward he mapped out his plan of action. He who had been guilty of this dangerous delay was now all eagerness to know the worst—or best. He felt greatly agitated as he hurried along the well-known path leading up to Prospect Cottage.

The faithful Eliza was weeding her aunt’s garden for her as Robert approached. She was murmuring softly to herself the while, perchance thinking of the butcher who dashed so recklessly about the neighbourhood, and with whom she kept company, after the approved fashion of maid-servants.

‘Lor’, Mr Hossack, what a turn you give me! No, there’s nobody in, sir. There was nothing for it but I must take the kettle out at five o’clock, up to the furze bushes yonder, where I left ’em. Miss Shirley said as how she wanted to have a picnic like they used to in that outlandish place where the young mistresses was educated. He’s there, too.’

This was spoken with intense awe. Eliza could mean none other than the future Earl of Musselburgh.

‘I am glad of that,’ answered Robert.

To Eliza Mr Hossack was altogether an enigma. He had such funny, though engaging, ways with him. Nor could she at all comprehend why a man should spend his hours eternally in writing. Unenterprising Eliza. How, pray, were all those thrilling stories you devoured so eagerly in the ‘Girl’s Own Particular’ produced, if not by the industry of brothers of that

craft to which Robert belonged—some folks said ornamented?

'He's sweet on one of 'em, but I can't make out which. Awkward if it's Miss Nora, because she's bespoke by the Earl as is to be,' mused Eliza, as she watched the retreating figure of Mr Hossack. 'It's a rum thing. He don't seem a bit stuck-up after his slice of luck; just as humble as ever. He hadn't been in the Cottage five minutes before his nose was in a book. From what I've read, I thought lords was quite a different lot—regular swells, and rare flirts too, besides drivin' coaches. This one's as mild as aunt's table-beer; but I must say he's nice. I wonder when they're going to get spliced. If they take as long making up their minds over it as my Tom, it won't be yet a while.' After which practical reflection Miss Eliza picked up her hoe, and resumed work with a sigh.

Robert paused when he came within view of those he sought. Unobserved, he would just watch them for a space. He must not be too eager, lest he spoilt all, and at that particular moment he felt rather unnerved. If repulse were in store, it must be borne like a man, his feelings absolutely held under control, to prove how his love was built upon the strongest foundations of endurance. Above everything, Shirley must be spared from pain. If Robert perceived—had he not made a profound study of her lightest whim?—that her affections were centred elsewhere, he must be prepared to crush self—for her dear sake. Though it were an unkindly ruling, it must be accepted with submission. Robert flattered himself he was not altogether a coward, as his recent flight and denial of Shirley's presence had shown. His will had enabled him to subdue his passions, the victory bringing him

the recompense which a conviction of right must always do. It is true he now owed to himself that perhaps he had been a little over-cautious and fearful. But he must be armed at all points; his fortitude strengthened against every possible assault.

So Robert tarried for a while. There could be no harm in secretly regarding her whom he had not seen for weeks, which appeared years to him. What a merry, picturesque group they made. Neil was stretched at length upon the grass, gazing up at his little Nora. He looked so well and happy in his new-born pride of rank. His face, Robert thought, had gained in seriousness, as if his inevitable responsibilities were already beginning to weigh upon him, but there was the same honest look: might it be long ere it was driven away. As Neil rose, the suppleness of his limbs and elegance of carriage were fully manifest. He had always held himself well, but constant stooping over the stockbroker's desk had cramped the shoulders of late. With release came expansion of the frame. Neil stood once more erect and active, a bright, healthy specimen of a young English nobleman. As for Nora, she sat, as usual, placid in her restful content, her gentle gaze fixed lovingly upon her cousin, the note-book at hand ready to jot down any useful fancies for elaboration in novelette, or towards the reform of the thoughtless donkey-boys.

What of Shirley Wodehouse as Robert beheld her? He found her simply more bewitching than ever; evidently, also, in the highest spirits, which had not yet evaporated. Probably she had been indulging in a little cheerful banter at Neil's expense. Recent events formed an irresistible topic for the exercise of her ingenuity. She was altogether so lively, so free from

any vestige of care, that Robert chose to augur therefrom unfavourably for his suit. Concealment was by no means feeding on her damask cheek, either in regard to Mr Ferguson or himself. No two opinions could exist as to that fact. Did he, then, expect to find Shirley 'grizzling'—as she would have termed it—like other fair but foolish damsels overtaken by a hopeless passion? Such conduct would surely be opposed to her notions, which, in respect to such proceedings, were quite radical and characteristic. Perhaps Robert believed in affinities, expecting to find Shirley aware, by some mysterious symptoms, of his presence in ambush. Why, knowing her so well, he should construe her manner as being adverse to his interests is curious. It must, however, in his defence, be remembered that he was in a highly-wrought frame of mind—quite incapable of viewing matters with his accustomed calm. Presently he plucked up courage to approach the three, just as Shirley was in the act of lifting the kettle from its tripod.

'Mr Hossack, I verily declare! We were debating whether you had not forgotten all about us with the distractions of Mannteufel Street. A minute later, I could not have offered you a cup of tea, as the gipsies are breaking up their encampment. Allow me to introduce the only genuine Earl of Musselburgh, the original rightful heir; all others are shameless impostors. Do you notice any remarkable change in his appearance? For our part, we think he bears his honours with all proper dignity. Wait till you see him in the family tartan. I assure you that is a sight not encountered every day.'

It was odd, whenever Robert and Shirley met, she broke out into this excessive volubility. Except, how-

ever, that she dropped the kettle, as she bent over the embers to kindle them into a flame, she did not evince any unusual signs of emotion.

'My dear Shirley, you really are incorrigible,' laughed little Nora. 'Mr Hossack will know by this time that you are unaccountable for your conduct when taking tea on Hampstead Heath. I do not find you looking as well as usual, sir. I fear London must be very trying after all the fresh air to which you have been accustomed.'

Robert was grasping Neil warmly by the hand, thereby conveying congratulations none the less genuine because they were as yet unspoken.

'Nora is always so considerate for the healths of her friends as to sometimes neglect her own. Shirley persists that our local secretary is overworked. You must give us your candid opinion. She also says that she dreads the day when I obtain absolute dominion over her sister.'

'Miss Wodehouse will run the risk of being killed by kindness. I foresee no other danger,' which was a creditable rejoinder considering Robert's preoccupied condition. 'Surprises have come upon me so thickly of late, that I am quite at a loss for words to express myself. Need I say I rejoice greatly at this good-fortune.'

'I am sure Nevill shares my appreciation of your good wishes, Mr Hossack. For him, as well as myself, I thank you most sincerely. We have been one in thought and converse ever since we were children. Therefore, I trust our union, when it takes place, will be approved Whence alone any blessings are of value.'

'Marriages are made in Heaven, Miss Wodehouse.'

'There, I have just contrived to squeeze you out a cup, Mr Hossack. You must excuse the spoon.'

Don't you think our Nollekins looks a little peaky this evening? What a pity it is that literary ladies who are not very strong are so obstinate, when expressly told not to overtax their brain-boxes. I know you approve, though your politeness may prevent your agreeing with me.' Shirley passed from the gay to a more serious mood. 'I am as firm a believer in temperance as most people. But I cannot for the life of me make out how brickmakers and the like are to be converted by tracts they don't understand. They may appreciate the pictures, but what reasonable person can expect them to follow the printed exhortations produced for their benefit? I know your committee think me a perfect heathen; that I shall get a scolding presently in private, I am equally certain. But I must speak my mind. I do feel most strongly how sad it is, and how difficult, not to be able to reach their better natures. Still your society never will do it until they alter their plans. The fatal mistake is that they imagine these rough creatures' brains are cast in the same mould as their own, with the same capacity for reasoning. I thoroughly share Mary's opinion, that you will only get at them on their own ground, after stern proofs of punishment and suffering in store, if they do wrong. They must be talked to bluntly, very often frightened. Dose them with any quantity of goody-goody stories, and you will get nothing but ridicule, perhaps a few brickbats into the bargain. Their intellects simply are not up to ours; they can't grasp the arguments. When you have made an impression in the only manner possible, you may be able to lead them more gently "by the dissemination of pure and wholesome literature," as your leaflets put it so prettily: before then, never.

You might as well try to comprehend the awful hardships of the poor without going amongst them and entering into their lives, with all their bitter struggles and splendid examples of endurance. I don't believe in the charity which drops its money into a box, then walks away with a smug satisfaction at having done all that is required of it.' Seeing Nora's look of distress, Shirley hastened to comfort her with an affectionate embrace. 'I don't wish to say, for a single instant, that our pet does not do all she can in a most devoted manner, or that your organising council, or whatever it calls itself, is not prompted by the best of motives. But I do persist that you are one and all as ignorant as babies of the proper way to reach those people. I know it is most disappointing work. But until you can gain their sympathies by coming down to their levels, making them feel that you are actually one in their struggles, pleasures and responsibilities, knock down the prejudices of poverty and pride—remember the poor are very proud, Nora—you might as well drop your well-meaning tracts into the ponds yonder. Do you recollect Mr Trengrouse the surrogate at Budleigh-Tarleton? Well, he went the right way to work, throwing off his white choker, racing, playing cricket, and making quite a boy of himself, with the villagers, just as if there was no difference in their stations. That is why they grew to worship him so, confided to him all their little worries and troubles. Believe me, it is a precious gift to know how to thoroughly understand the poor. They are so dreadfully sensitive, resentful, too, of interference, that they require the most delicate treatment. How difficult it is to make clear what I mean.

'What book that was ever written, what play per-

formed, which really plumbed the depths of human misery, as mortal man often endures it in his own flesh and person? Writers, actors, painters, may get near the mark, even make people cry and feel generally wretched, but I maintain there is always just that indescribable something wanting to make their picture actual, and therefore human, when they try to do it. I am convinced there are certain heroic capabilities of endurance in humanity no art, or pen, or brush, can ever really hope to touch.'

Notwithstanding her professed inability to master her subject, it was evident that Shirley had approached it with extreme earnestness. It tallied, also, so faithfully with Robert's views. Had they not received practical confirmation during many a pensive stroll, when, flying from the reckless talk of the smoking-room, or—worse infliction—the mischief-making upstairs, he had taken his lesson from the ever-fruitful sermon preached by the London streets? How he had yearned for this faculty of which Shirley spoke, his heart aching at its impotence to solve the grim problem of how to wean the imperilled soul of drunkard, outcast, blasphemer, from the foul mire of ignorance in which it wallowed. Believer as he was in the might of the pen, he could not disguise how too often it failed in its effort to depict the stern actualities of life, its efforts unblest, its task abortive.

'If you remember, Shirley, dear, I did join the district visiting class, until I was obliged to give up through over-exertion. I cannot fancy the house-to-house visits were altogether valueless. Indeed, many of the cottagers told their grievances to me with remarkable candour. From my scanty purse, I endeavoured to relieve their necessities as far as possible.'

'As if you could be anything but an angel, wherever you went, or will fail to be rewarded for all your generosity, though it was misdirected, as I have told you. Of course I know you were awfully good and patient ; it's a pity there are not more like you. I'm not blaming either your intentions, or those of your society, only the wrong principles you go upon. Now let us talk about something else. Neil was making us laugh very much, Mr Hossack, with a description of his final leave-taking from the firm of Messrs Sharp & Argent. Do tell us all over again, cousin. It must have been too funny.'

'No, I really am not equal to that, Shirley,' Neil laughed. 'I hope I have said good-bye to those "Johnnies" and "Jugginses" for ever. But, I must say, they were all very civil when I left.'

'Yes, when they thought they could get something out of you. What an objectionable person that Mr Argent must be. What was it he was constantly saying? I remember. "Birds pretty plentiful up your way?" He didn't seem to possess a soul above partridges, and—what were those other things?—flamingoes.'

'Contangoes, Shirley ; something quite different.'

'Well, it is all double-dutch to me. Stockbrokers must be a very curious race of mortals.'

'They certainly are. But, if a trifle rough and jocular, they are very open-handed. It was the constant atmosphere of money which troubled me so. Still, it has been an experience.'

'One you are not likely to forget in a hurry. They danced round you, and sang comic songs, when they heard what a swell they'd been tormenting without knowing it, did they not, Neil?'

'Yes. Business happened to be slack just then, unfortunately for me. However, I am thankful to say we all parted the best of friends.'

'I know exactly what will happen. In your good-nature, you will organise a grand battue, one of these days, for their especial edification, when the Musselburgh preserves are properly stocked. How like my cousin! Nora, you'll have to drive out and entertain a lot of vulgar city people at luncheon. Think of a delicate little countess presiding over such a repast. It will be lovely. Only, pray excuse me from making one of the party. A day's fishing in the lake will be more in my line.'

Shirley prattled on in this strain for a long while. Pleasant as it was to hear and admire her, it was not quite the consolation Robert required just then. Nor did he foresee any immediate likelihood of finding the opportunity he thirsted for, of speaking alone with their lively entertainer. It was very harassing, and unfortunate. Every moment Mr Ferguson might approach over the brow of the hill, when the chance of a *tête-à-tête* would be indeed remote. What, too, if the curate were bent upon a similar errand as Robert's? That alarming possibility roused the layman to action. He beckoned Neil aside, and in a few earnest sentences made known his desires. Assuredly pupil had never seen tutor so desperate before. He hoped nothing was amiss. Neil even offered to fetch some restorative from the 'Holly Bush.' Needless to say, he was profoundly ignorant of Robert's intentions. Possibly it had reference to an autumn professional engagement, or some startling situation in fiction, for he had known the writer not above taking advice on so important a subject. Whatever the nature of

the required interview, he was only too anxious to oblige.

'What do you say to a stroll, miss?' he inquired of little Nora. 'I am sure your eyes must ache with all that contemplation of the landscape. I daresay Shirley may be trusted with the utensils. If the Reverend Ferguson arrives, he will no doubt be most willing to act as a pack-horse. Or she might signal for Eliza, if she has recovered from the shock of beholding me in my new character.'

Shirley was on her feet at once.

'The things will be quite safe here. Where shall we go? As for Mr Ferguson—nonsense; he hates carrying parcels.'

'Inconsiderate cousin! Cannot we two enjoy our chats, undisturbed, in peace? Who knows what important dilemma you may be able to rescue Mr Hossack's heroine from?' An inquiry which showed plainly Neil's forte was not that of match-maker.

The blood rushed to Shirley's cheeks as she met Robert's clear grey eyes, which certainly asked her to remain. Surely she was not going to be a silly girl now, after having acted so satisfactorily? Try, however, as she would to steady her voice, it shook as she answered, with feigned indifference,—

'I am quite sure Mr Hossack is capable of managing his plots without my assistance. But trot along, by all means—mischief in front, you know. We shall catch you up long before you have had time to settle the colour of your drawing-room carpet. That, I must explain, is a momentous question, which has already caused endless discussion. Considering these two cannot inhabit Musselburgh Hall for over a year, one would think there was no desperate hurry. But—'

Shirley tapped her forehead, to imply, no doubt, that newly-engaged couples were not quite sane on certain points. As to that, Robert could not offer an opinion yet awhile, he was only on the brink of a proposal.

‘There, I said it would take only a minute to tidy up. I thought, if I wrapped the things up neatly, we might sling the bundle on to your walking-stick, and carry it in turns, like pilgrims. Nobody would be any the wiser, would they? There isn’t a vestige left of our picnic, is there? How very warm it is this evening. I fancy we shall have a storm presently.’

‘We must expect sultry weather in August. I do not think there is any occasion to hurry. Suppose we sat down and talked. It is such a long time since we met. To me it has been an eternity.’

For so natural a suggestion, Shirley thought Mr Hossack’s words came very slowly. His manner, also, was needlessly grave. When she ventured timidly to seek his face, she found an expression there she had never seen before—supplication, entreaty, an intense agitation, all seemed concentrated in that look, which must haunt her for many a day. Was her love to be silent still, when, to save him from the suspicion of harm, there could be no limit to her sacrifice? Involuntarily she put forth her hand, as if to ward off some tangible danger which threatened that dear life: a simple act, yet fraught with what fateful import.

As if those gentle fingers held out veritable succour to one within the jaws of death, Robert grasped them with longing fervour. Before, his utterance had been measured and guarded, his feelings drilled into extreme subjection. Now, the reins of his restraint were loosened. His speech came fast and impassioned. He laboured under a most unwonted emotion. Still, the

girl's hand lay passively within his own: what had she to fear?

‘Miss Wodchouse—Shirley. Bear with me a little. If I could only tell you of the bliss at being once more near you, I know your generous heart would forgive my bluntness. Think what it must have been for one schooled in adversity, as I have been, with so few joys, a life warped, my work misunderstood, hopes, ambitions crushed under the relentless heel of poverty and disappointment; consider the comfort to a lonely, struggling mortal when your sweet presence came across his path, bringing peace, encouragement, content, to a well-nigh wasted life. Was it marvellous that admiration for the bravery with which you and your dear sister met your lots gave place in time to an all-consuming love for one who has been to me as a talisman, a staff of support, a sanctifier? Shirley, these, all these—ay, and far more—you have been to me. I lay my love at your feet, with the only claim for it that it is true and honest, if still unworthy. Dear heart, can you crown a devotion which, I will strive, shall be unbounded and abiding?’

Shirley lifted her eyes, and met Robert's absorbing gaze unflinchingly.

‘I have loved you, Robert, since we met,’ was all she said.

With one long-drawn sigh of consummated happiness the man drew Shirley to him. The bond was sealed with the first lover's kiss those pure, warm lips had known.

‘You will make that promise, dearest?’ whispered Robert presently.

Solemnly Shirley repeated the words, ‘For ever and for ever.’

CHAPTER IX.

SAVED.

MISS SUSIE CONE of Danville, Virginia State, was sitting in her apartment in the Rue Hébert feeling rather lonely. At length she began to recognise the futility of her attempts to master the French language to her entire satisfaction. Very undecided was the American as to her plans. She had a notion to rejoin those relations who evinced such a ridiculous taste for 'hovering around the Binda.'

Resourceful Susie could never have believed it possible that she could miss the companionship of Mary Stapleton so much. She had taken a real liking to this Englishwoman with the romantic history, which the pleasant holiday they had spent together at Roussoff had greatly increased. When they had parted she had made Mary promise to keep her posted up in the development of a drama which showed signs of being so exciting. Mary had not forgotten her word. Susie now rejoiced with the others that the plucky 'Madame Traill' was reunited after all her hardships, though Miss Cone was certainly astonished how the reconciliation had been effected with the unpromising materials at Mary's disposal. But it had been accomplished somehow; the gentleman who had stumbled

so unceremoniously against Miss Cone's door—with whom she had held that short, yet portentous interview—having apparently been led to see the error of his conduct. The good-natured, if eccentric, Susie was prepared at once to forgive Mr Stapleton for any temporary annoyance he might have caused her, provided he treated his wife properly in the future.

Now where should Susie go? That she had been stationary so long in Paris was an unusual circumstance for so enthusiastic a globe-trotter. She had stuffed herself with as much idiomatic French as could reasonably be expected of her. If she had failed to catch the accent and coveted style of the true Parisian to perfection, it was certainly owing to no lack of application on her part, as the phalanx of materials amply proved. She supposed 'Madame Traill' had been right in her advice. But Susie never could persuade herself to board with a family. Perhaps, also, her Americanisms, which she found such difficulty in shedding, or the size of her nose, accounted in a measure for the failure. Well, she had given the attempt a fair trial. If discomfited, she could at any rate return to her deluded compatriots proud in the knowledge of partial, though not absolute conquest. She might put those to shame whose range of observation was so sadly limited, residence in the Rue Hébert having produced many singular insights into the manners and customs of the natives. The period Miss Cone had prescribed for her isolation had long expired. She had only to remove the edict which kept her friends at bay, when a whole tribe of spry, chatty Americans would descend upon her. But she did not pine for that enjoyment just yet. She desired rather a sight of Mary Stapleton's face now it must

be cleared of its sadness—that face which had attracted Miss Cone so irresistibly. Besides, the Englishwoman had of late made her mark in quite an original line, proving herself mistress of those very accomplishments the other had hopelessly struggled to acquire. To attack a false religion in print, at its very root, in a strange language, struck Susie as a performance to be proud of, the more commendable because the difficult work had been carried on whilst Mary was very poor, besides labouring under much mental disturbance. Never once throughout their acquaintance had she known the teacher give way. Always cheerful, cultured, of winning manners, she had fairly won the American's heart, which was rather tough, and did not go out readily to everybody.

Therefore Susie had an irresistible longing to see Mary and the reformed Mr Stapleton again. But she was perplexed how to manage it. There were hints in her friend's correspondence that, when her husband was strong enough, she meant to bring him over to France—Miss Cone, in her thoughts, recommending her to keep a sharp eye upon him for the future. But this information was not very recent. For all she knew to the contrary, Mary might still be nursing the invalid in Welpole Street. Suddenly it occurred to her that perhaps Madame Joubert might be able to throw some light on Mary's movements. Being a woman of resource, Miss Cone was very soon striding along in the direction of Passy and the Villa Sunnyside. Although invited, she had never been to call on the pork-butcher's wife. Miss Cone imagined that because the old lady admired the English so much, it did not follow that she had an equal affection for Americans. But when she beheld the likeness of the pig upon those

remarkable gates, and recollected how her countrymen were purveyors of pork on a gigantic scale; Susie thought there was a chance of a friendly reception. During the interval of waiting, Miss Cone found time to notice the gravel walks, raked so perseveringly every day by Madame Joubert's own hand, the geraniums, apparently suffering from prolonged drought, also the noble flight of steps leading to the trellised porch, to which the creepers, for some reason, objected to cling. Sunnyside was not much like any English villa Miss Cone had encountered in her travels. But, knowing her hobby, Susie would not have told the Frenchwoman so for the world. Madame Joubert came bustling to the gate herself, peering out upon her visitor curiously.

'*La belle Américaine!* You make me grand pleasure, of a truth; but why come you not before? Welcome to Sunnyside. You like her—yes? I see sat in your eye. And my garden? Ah, but se trouble I have to make se flowers crow! They nevare look so green, so fresh as I would vish. Why, den, come you not to Roussoff dis summer? We miss you all so much, in especial se dear "Madame Traill." *Hélas*, my Alphonse, he find himself eel sere, and we come back. What it was, I know not, unless he eat too much lobster. Now se doctor he say we must go Contrexéville for to take se water. It is most unhappy. *Ecoutez*, only yesterday I receive invitation for Salamé, where Mrs Staple-ton and her naughty, returned husband, with a grand party, disport themselves. What you sink? Sere is a milord with sem! *Mon Dieu*, but I would love to see a veritable milord! Yet, even for sat, I leave not my good Alphonse before he become quite well again. No, I leave him not.'

'I'm disposed to think you won't,' Miss Cone found an opportunity to remark. 'So our friends have gone to Salamé, have they? Well, I fancy I'll join them straight away. I'm about tired of Paris, with its queer ways and queerer tricks of speech. Sorry you can't come along too, madame. When you've done with that place with the lengthy name, you might let monsieur try the sea-breezes to complete his recovery: that's the best tonic, after all. Guess you haven't got a path-finder handy? Last time I went into Brittany I got on the wrong track somehow.'

Madame Joubert shook her head. She could keep up with an English-speaking person through most conversations. But this American lady, with her curious expressions, was a trifle beyond her.

'What you call, path-finder? I know him not.'

Miss Cone smiled.

'I'm awful thoughtless. Time table for the cars, rail guide.'

'Unhappily, no. For Roussoff I have all se trains at finger top. But this Salamé, it lie above my acquaintance.'

'Don't matter. I'll look in at the Binda and show those girls I'm alive. Wonder what they've been after all this while? Perhaps they've fallen sick, and gone home. Pity they were so stubborn. Flocking around perpetual like that can't be wholesome. Good-bye, Madame Joubert. Don't forget, Susie Cone'll be just de-lighted to meet you and monsieur by the ocean presently.'

'You go not yet, I beseech? Of a truth, you take se lunch or se glass of sherry wine? To-day my Alphonse he descend for first time since a week. He feel so sore if he give you not shake hand. Then

ere is my boudoir arranged à l'Anglaise, also many English sings very remarkable. Surely you spend a long, long day with us to tell all se news about our dear madame ?'

'Quite impossible, though I'm real grateful for the invitation. As for news, I haven't got any. Came out to Passy to find some. There's no staying Susie when she's once made up her mind for a globe-trot. She feels kinder dazed with all that French cramming ; as if nothing short of a regular scamper around Europe would cure her.'

After another hearty 'shake hand,' Miss Cone, to Madame Joubert's disappointment, sallied forth from the Villa Sunnyside. She strode rapidly off in search of her unenterprising relations. She found them safe and sound, about to indulge in a good square meal—a proceeding which provoked Susie's outspoken censure. After an hour's lively chatter, of the true American give-and-take though perfectly good-natured description, Miss Cone returned to the Rue Hébert, packed her trunk, settled her account with her old enemy the landlord, wrote a few letters, and left Paris for an indefinite period. Susie certainly did not let the grass grow under her feet when she had once resolved upon an outing. Nor had the others who had preceded her to Salamé been dilatory in their movements. Whilst the American is journeying into Brittany, let us see how those who were 'ranging' themselves so satisfactorily are getting on down by the sea.

It may be remembered how Mary had promised to return some day and take buxom Mademoiselle Marguérite, who kept the Hôtel Provençal, by surprise. But that jolly cateress certainly never expected such

an invasion as took her by storm one fine September morning.

Often during her leisure hours had mademoiselle thought of the smiling English bride who had won all hearts during her too brief visit. She had kept the breakfast-table in such good humour when the weather was so *vilain*, interfering with the customary diversions of the guests, threatening, indeed, to drive them away. That was no small obligation to put a thrifty family under, when it was all-important to keep visitors from grumbling and patronising rival establishments. But season after season had passed without Mrs Stapleton's reappearance. Mademoiselle's consolation, as each drew to a close, being that the English travelled late—that sooner or later the lady must come. Often had she comforted her mother with this prophecy—the parent who was cook to the Provençal as well, and rarely visible in the flesh except from behind the sliding-panel through which her culinary triumphs were handed.

Once more stout Marguérite stands at the hotel entrance surveying the picturesque village of Salamé, where she knows everybody, and everybody knows her. She sighs as she wonders if it is yet possible for a certain promise to be redeemed that year. Wide gaps already appear in her table ; only a few holiday-makers remain, and they, with one exception, on unremunerative terms. How stimulating the arrival of an English contingent would be. Mademoiselle was forced to decide that such a delightful advent was unlikely. That ominous fourteenth of the month, when the bathing season in France closes so punctually, was very near at hand ; half the apartments in Salamé were vacated ; the shanties preparing to shut

for want of patronage ; the dripping *baigneurs* calculating their savings with which they had to meet the unprofitable winter. Still, mademoiselle is not without hope. It was notorious that the English not only travelled late, but when they did arrive, came in gratifying numbers. Had she not entertained them even in October, when the cold winds swept down their pretty Boulevard and caught the Provençal full in its face? When the sentry-boxes stood in a mournful row in the field behind Monsieur Choiseul's farm ; the newspaper-boy ceased to tootle through the village ; the very letter-box was taken from the wall opposite until another summer. That morning things have not come to quite so dismal a pass as that. Still, the outlook is far from cheerful. Mademoiselle Marguérite is turning indoors with as much discontent reflected on her ruddy countenance as it is capable of expressing when she hears a whip cracking in the distance. Presently, from behind a cloud of dust, she espies the inflated blouse of a coachman, with—stimulating sight—his vehicle piled high with luggage. Travellers are coming to Salamé ; could it be the long-expected party? Whoever they may be, mademoiselle must try to catch them. None in their senses could want to hire a villa at this time of year. Of course they might be on the way to the '*Quic*' or the '*Plage*.' But if they are strangers, mademoiselle thinks, with pardonable pride, they can hardly pass her commanding premises without giving her a trial. Joy, it is Mrs Stapleton, with two other ladies! Miss Crossly's beam when she assures her patrons of the central position of Peckmore's is the feeblest glimmer compared with the illumination of Miss Margaret's visage as she recognises the new-comer. To rush

within, seize and tie on a clean apron, adjust the advertisement of Bass' Ale upon the wall, and, in the exuberance of her delight, call lustily, '*Maman!*' '*Ernestine!*' is the work of an instant. Then she hurries out and shouts a downright hearty welcome to the occupants of the carriage.

'I told you I should take you by storm again, Mademoiselle Margu rite. How is everybody?' inquired smiling Mary Stapleton. 'You see, I have kept my word at last, and when I can clear myself of all these wraps, will show you that I am in earnest. I expect you have long since ceased to believe in me—well, I am very penitent. Now we are here, I hope you are not going to turn us away? We have three ravenous attendants following on foot, who will tax your amiable mother's resources to the utmost. We shall want at least a floor of bedrooms. You can accommodate us?'

'*Odam, oui, madame,*' cried Mademoiselle Margu rite—the use of that singular little expletive gave Nora a slight shock. Fortunately she had more than one tract in her bag bearing specially on the sinfulness of using bad language—'nearly the whole house is at your disposal. The season closes fast. As for turning you away, that were indeed ungracious. With the exception of Madame Jolivet from Rennes, who sits all day in her wicker cage looking at the sea, the two captains—one who spends his nights at the Casino, and sleeps till noon, the other in roaming on the cliffs of Roth neuf with his comical dog—and a few chance customers, the Proven al is, alas, deserted.'

'Then we have arrived in the nick of time to cheer your drooping spirits. Come along, children. Ah, Madame Jervaux and Ernestine, I declare! It is

good for sore eyes to see you once more. What elixir is there in Salamé which makes you all look younger than ever? These are my attached friends—Miss Nora Wodehouse, Miss Shirley Wodehouse. We are going to stop as long as our money holds out, if you will keep us. Our respective young men are tramping along that dreadfully dusty road of yours from St Malo. Why are you still without water-carts in this district?’

Mary’s quick glance travelled round the *salle-à-manger*, where the table was always laid so hospitably. The terra-cotta nymph in the centre still hesitated over her dive into the smallest of salt-cellars; the two presentation ornaments from the Japanese kiosk across the way, filled, as always, with those wonderful grasses which never seem to wither; mademoiselle’s cabinet, stocked with its usual choice collection of china, glass and liqueur bottles; the door of the slip of a drawing-room, where, on wet evenings, the Provençal guests sang and chatted in so lively a manner, standing ajar, as customary.

‘I declare you don’t alter a bit in these parts. Why, it seems only yesterday I sat in this very chair and talked dreadfully bad French to my *vis-à-vis*, who was— Yes, I verily believe you are right, this self-same Madame Jolivet from Rennes, who appears to rival me in her fondness for watching the ocean. Mademoiselle, I believe you got wind of our coming by some mysterious process, and hatched a friendly conspiracy. Or have I been asleep these last years, and dreamt only the lifetime of poverty, temptation and remorse, which has been crammed into it— God forgive me, what am I saying, when all has ended now? Come, Ernestine is dying to show us our

rooms. Our escort will be here directly. We must make ourselves presentable before their arrival. After that I will introduce you, and your young men, to the village proper, which lies beyond that green avenue. When once I am roused to action, you will find me an inveterate sight-seer. So be warned and prepared.'

The captain who preferred the contemplation of Nature to the diversions of the *Cercle* was dozing on a bench outside, with his little terrier Benjamin on his knee. He became wide-awake when he heard Mary's voice. So did Benny, who pricked up his ears, growling at strangers who dared disturb his master's or his own slumbers. This warrior was quite a different specimen to the effeminate person who gambled so persistently at the Casino. He was blue-eyed, bronzed, and brave. Moreover, he was quite as fond of the sea as the little old woman from Rennes, or even Mary Stapleton herself. Drifting aimlessly about Brittany, he had chanced upon this pleasant spot, and tarried there, enjoying its quiet, soothing charms, his dog as sole companion. In a very short time he became an established favourite. Mademoiselle was never tired of informing fresh arrivals how '*gentil*' both he and his Scotch terrier were.

How small the world is! Seated a few feet from Mary was this man, who, in the days of ill-treatment and desertion, had sacrificed much in his endeavour to trace her whereabouts—lessen the burthen of distress a hasty marriage had brought upon her. But Mary's effacement had been so complete that, notwithstanding his determination, John Hepburn at length had been obliged to give in. Now, in this unlikely spot, he once more heard that voice, the recollection of which had been ever present through many a lonely year.

The captain had journeyed much in his time, seen many strange lands and sights. He had been in action, fighting with a courage which had won him distinction and reward. In the eyes of men he was what he was far too modest to acknowledge to himself—a hero. But the hardest fight of all had been the one he could scarcely trust himself to mention now—save, perhaps, to the discreet ears of Benny—that battle with the unkindly fate (a deplorable accident, as he had tried to reason at the time) which had robbed him of his heart's desire. For, hurrying back from India with the intention of winning Mary Grace Ivimey as his wife, he found that another had forestalled him. But for those hours of delay when his troopship was tossed at the mercy of wind and wave, he might have been in time. Now he was too late, and had to reconcile himself to assuredly as cruel a stroke of fortune as could fall to the lot of any honest man. Think how his misery became intensified when he heard that Mary had been driven to leave the husband who had dared to approach one compared with whom he was the vilest dross. If she had only let John Hepburn step in then to prove his devotion, need be, with his life! Rather, she had chosen flight, no one could tell him whither. They who have felt the tortures of uncertainty concerning the safety of their beloved will feel for this fine fellow as, after fruitless efforts, he failed to trace the woman he sought and desired to serve.

Happily the man had faith and religion to support him during his search. Moreover, he was sustained by an unflinching belief in Mary's firmness and strength of will. Therefore he feared not for her soul's safety, be her trials ever so heavy. But what he did dread

was the pride which she admitted had been her stumbling-block too often. He knew that sooner than humble herself, or retract one iota of any decision she might have taken, Mary would compel her frame to bear infinite hardships, the very thought of which filled him with a well-nigh unbearable torture. But beyond ascertaining through the Misses Hollebone that Mary's action was voluntary, also, from last accounts, she was in health, though the struggle to exist was severe, her would-be protector could discover nothing. Mary's faithful old friends evidently knew where she was. But the captain was too much of a gentleman to persist in forcing them to divulge the secret entrusted to them. So with these small tantalising scraps of comfort John Hepburn had to rest content.

Of course the object of all this solicitude was ignorant of how a good man and true was eating out his heart for her sake. Indeed, beyond recollecting that Captain Hepburn had, on the strength of her old teacher's introduction when a parlour-boarder at Ephraim House, paid her some attention, had called to say good-bye on leaving for India, Mary knew little of him. She thought him very nice; she had a great respect for him. As for any more tender feeling, it was entirely absent. Had she been older, she might have detected in his manner at leave-taking something beyond an ordinary interest in her welfare. Have read in his honest eyes—not clever at deception—how John Hepburn saw he must wait a while before he ventured to ask Mary Grace to become his wife. Could the parlour-boarder have looked deeper into his honest heart, she, so full of kindness, would have grieved sorely that she should be the innocent cause

of his suffering. But she never dreamt that he cared more for her than some mere chance acquaintance. As for applying to him for aid when in need, it never entered her head any more than the fact that he was in love with her

Now, after these weary years, the two were destined to meet again. Well, whatever straits Mary had passed through, be her then position what it might, it was evident that at present she was amongst friends. John Hepburn thanked God for His unceasing care of her. If she were wife or widow, he could only conjecture. Judging from the accounts which had reached him of her husband's transgressions, he inclined to the latter opinion. She would scarcely be in such high spirits were the mill-stone still round her neck. Remote, also, was the likelihood of a reconciliation having taken place. Without a doubt the dispensation of Providence had been just. At anyrate, there was the intense relief that Mary was no longer persecuted. Benny and he would take their accustomed stroll along the cliffs to think matters over together. There was no risk of losing Mary now, and, curiously enough, the captain did not see any pressing need for leaving Salamé, although only yesterday he had decided to do so that week.

This was, indeed, a remarkable coincidence, mused the soldier as he walked leisurely on, Benny close at his heels. The terrier was pretty sure something was in the wind. His eyes might not be quite so bright as formerly, but there was enough perception left for him to suspect that the monotony of their visit was about to be interrupted. Scampers over the sands, rummages amongst the rocks, in that invigorating air, were certainly delightful pastimes. But any well-

bred dog, placed on so confidential a footing as Benny, must perceive with half an eye how his master was depressed, which robbed the gambols of much of their enjoyment. He had drifted lately into a more than usually pensive state, from which all the long walks and reveries on the cliffs or in sheltered coves failed to rouse him. Benny had remarked his melancholy increase ever since he gave up rushing from one place on the Continent to another, apparently looking for somebody he could never find. Endless were the days and nights the pair spent in trains or on steamboats, the last experience being very trying, as poor Benny was a wretched sailor. No sooner had they set foot in one hotel than they were off to another : the captain's energy and restlessness were remarkable. Not that the terrier found himself in the least neglected. For his master was indulgent to a fault, and gifted with the sweetest of tempers. Be the hour ever so late, his pet was always served first with any delicate morsels obtainable, chopped up by the man's own hands. Nor, with all the obvious claims upon his time, did the soldier once omit to spread out the old lounge-coat which served as Benny's bed, for his doggie to coil himself up and slumber at will. Ever since that unfortunate occurrence in the Green Park, when, as far as the chief performer could make out, he had been seized with a fit, and conveyed home post-haste in a cab, feeling miserably weak for days after he recovered consciousness, his diet had been most carefully considered. Unquestionably, from what he had overheard the doctor say, Benny owed his life to the promptitude and devoted nursing of John Hepburn. Small wonder, therefore, that this faithful quadruped's gratitude was boundless, or that the searcher's failures

found a ready sympathiser in the person of 'Monsieur Benjamin,' as these polite Brittany folk always called him.

What could possibly have occurred to make the captain so cheerful this morning? He was positively humming a tune, quite like his former self. Moreover, when they got well out into the country, he engaged in a mimic duel with an invisible assailant, finally running him through the body with his walking-stick in very finished style. Had he at length tracked down the adversary he sought so persistently, or was the combat merely to illustrate the victory over some trouble removed whilst Benny slept? It did not matter as long as the result was so satisfactory. To celebrate the occasion, the dog set up a joyous bark, and raced about furiously. Captain Hepburn re-lighted his pipe, and sat down upon a tree stump.

'Quiet, quiet, Benjamin! What's come over you, wriggling about like a dancing dervish? If you're the sensible, well-behaved little Scotchman, with the irreproachable pedigree, I take you for, you'd better bide a wee, because we are going to walk all the way to oysterland presently. Let me just find those twinklers of yours, if I can.' He smoothed the black hair away from his dumb follower's eyes, and looked into them with his own bonnie ones. 'Yes,' continued the captain, after a prolonged scrutiny, 'I believe you're the same faithful Benny, so I'll let you into a secret. After much weary waiting, I've discovered somebody without whom life, to me, is not worth living. Isn't that splendid fun? Only, don't you see, I'm just in a bit of a fix. At the best of times I'm a dull sort of chap. I want to be awfully careful not to make a donkey of myself when we two meet, as we must shortly.

That's why I came out here at once, to arrange my plans, don't you know. If you're very fond of a person, it's not always easy to disguise your feelings. I wouldn't willingly cause Mary an instant's pain, for all the wealth of the Indies. You dumb, loyal Benny! If I could make you understand how I loved that woman—and love her now. Only supposing a certain thing hasn't come about—she still belongs to a black-guard who, if report be true, is beyond the pale of human forgiveness—then she is as far from me as ever. Some excuse for my feeling knocked over, isn't there? I want to brace myself up to be a man, to do what's right. Only, it will be rather hard lines, won't it old dog, if I find her a wife—in name only, mind you—chained to a brute like that?'

The speaker's voice was very sad as he put this important question. What would not the favoured Benny have given for just one minute's power of speech to assure brave John Hepburn of his little dog's fidelity? If ever a hero deserved happiness, it was he. There must be something woefully at fault in the arrangement of the world's affairs that he, of all others, should have been made to suffer. Yet, with an intense longing to comfort him, Benny could only wag his tail and nestle closer as he licked the kindly hand of his preserver. How he hated everybody who had stood in the way of this gallant gentleman's wishes! No one could accuse him of being either a snappish or vindictive terrier. But, in so just a cause, he meant to call the few teeth he had left to his assistance in avenging his master's wrongs when or wherever Benny came across the originator of them. Otherwise, he would be unworthy of the aristocratic breed he came from.

‘It’s a curious thing,’ mused Captain Hepburn, ‘but directly I knew for certain Mary was safe, I felt as if, come what may, I should be stronger to face the future, with or without her by my side. If I could only rid myself of the fear that this Stapleton fellow has still a hold upon her to darken her days, all the tortures I have endured for her sake would go for nothing. I suppose most fellows would have rushed headlong into the breach to meet their fate. I’m not that sort. Some say I’m even a trifle over-cautious for my own peace of mind. Anyhow, whether or no I am ever privileged to call her mine, I hope I am no coward; that I shall have strength given me to put her happiness before my own. I’ve had to act a good many parts in my time: possibly the most difficult *rôle* has yet to be played. It’s a funny world, isn’t it, Benjamin? I’ll give you five minutes for a scamper. Then we must put our best feet foremost, or Monsieur Jacques’s waggonette-load will get to Cançale before us and gobble up all the oysters.’

Perhaps the pleasantest place in all Salamé for an evening lounge is the promenade, which almost connects the village with the massive ramparts of St Malo. When the moon is up, the ocean as calm as on the first night Mary’s personally-conducted party sallied forth for a visit to the Casino, the scene is indeed charming. Every sort of marine residence, from the tiny, substantial ‘Castel Dour,’ cunningly wedged in between its more pretentious neighbours, to the ornate villas, with their pretty coronal-shaped roofs, or with a toy windmill on the roof, line the walk at intervals as far as the red and white striped hotel, which stands out against the sky like a gigantic bathing-machine. Nor, as each successive tenant considers it his

bounden duty to treat the expensive structure to a fresh coat of paint, is there much chance of its becoming toned down yet awhile. More picturesque is the elegant pavilion, with its spikes and bulbous projections, that might have stepped straight up from Constantinople, but in reality has been transported from the foreign court of a Parisian World's Show by some enterprising squatter when Salamé was in its infancy. Light and graceful, this chocolate coloured abode, with its verandahs, arches and general airiness, forms quite a feature of the strand. So do the miniature Boulevards, up which you get many a green, tantalising peep countrywards.

How exquisite was the feeling of unity which stole over those happy ones as they lingered by the shore. It would seem as if the very waves were hushed in unison with the peaceful current of their thoughts. Who would not have passed through a world of trial and reverse for such a blissful hour as this?

'Good people,' broke in Mary, 'I am neglecting my duties shamefully. We shall never get through our programme at this rate; besides, you will vote me the dullest of entertainers. You see those twinkling lights yonder? That is our destination. I shall not allow a single halt until we reach them. Just a friendly hint before we start. This promenade is always under a state of repair. Star-gazers and love-sick young people, therefore, be cautious, for these confiding Bretonnes having a reckless disregard of their visitors' ankles. Beware also of Madame Jolivet's wicker basket. It is always turned face downwards at night time, why, nobody knows, unless it is to keep out the sea-serpent. It is a very trap for the unwary. Claud, dear, your arm.'

The Casino at Salamé, where people danced, read the papers, drank coffee, flirted or gambled as they felt disposed, was built in the same style as its more imposing neighbour, whence, also, it received its chief patronage, its striped exterior being if anything more pronounced. As our friends approached, the sounds of music swelled out through the open windows, to presently die away in soft, long-drawn notes of harmony, followed by a sharp burst of applause, jarring unpleasantly on the ears after such delicious tones.

Shirley was in ecstasies.

‘How lovely!’ she cried. ‘I do hope they will give us another treat. The orchestra played as one man.’

The audience streamed out, a merry, careless crowd, chatting and gesticulating as if they had no single care among them.

‘I am afraid that is all for to-night,’ said Mary. ‘Now, after due refreshment, they will go to the tables, and forget all about the music. If they would only stop the play, this would be, to my taste, one of the most delightful spots on earth. There is something positively repulsive in the opposites of pleasures the French cultivate. Fancy rushing direct from such a soul-stirring symphony to the seductions of roulette. What can one hope for from a nation as volatile as that?’

‘It is sad, indeed, to find them so frivolous,’ remarked little Nora. ‘Though I imagine the stakes are very trifling; the game merely a harmless diversion.’

‘You dear, innocent pet! My future Lord of Musselburgh, you really must try and instil a little wisdom into your *fiancée*, or her extreme simplicity will produce endless complications. Fancy calling *rouge et noir* at a Casino a harmless diversion! I do hope

you have not put such a mischievous interpretation upon the pastime into print, Miss Nora? If so, you must come with me at once, and have the illusion dispelled. I think you are to be trusted not to risk a husband's broad acres upon the turn of a wheel or hazard of the die. Pray, bear in mind, however much you may feel tempted, no distribution of those appropriate tracts with which I haven't a doubt your pocket is lined. Use your pen as vigorously as you like against the vice when you get back. You would only provoke ridicule, do more harm than good, by attacking it in your way out here.'

Mary turned to seek her husband. He was leaning on the low rail which separates the *café* from the public walk, gazing upwards. His wife touched his arm lightly.

'Perhaps you would not care to join us, dear? The salon cannot fail to be disagreeable; outside it is deliciously cool. I see Mr Hossack also prefers the fresh air.'

'Mr Stapleton and I were discussing the whereabouts of some of the lesser planets. Is it not a perfect night for a study of the heavens? Nor do I ever remember to have seen the water so absolutely still. *La mer est morte*, in very truth.'

'Yes, indeed. Once only have I seen it so dead-at-Roussoff. I shall never forget the impressions of that night. There lay the mournful island of Batz, appalling in its barren solitude, cut off from us by great stretches of sand, weed, and treacherous current; islets dotted about, as far as the eye could reach; the jutting promontory crowned by the white chapel of St Barbe, a constant landmark of legend and superstition. Proud and rugged, its walls kept ghostlike watch over the

little bay whither the Roussovites brought the rich produce of their fields. I sat in Mary Stewart's arbour amidst the chipped, crusted stones of long ago. Sleep held the toilers of Roussoff in its kindly arms; only the faintest lapping of the waves upon the beach disturbed the tranquil night, and told that the pulse of the sea beat still. Where was sleep and rest for me? It was during that awful time of mistrust and wavering, dear Claud, when, the devil at my elbow, doubt and despair gnawing at my heart, my soul was nearly slain. Before the scales fell finally from my eyes, or my mother's image again called me back to hope and—victory. Do not look sad, my husband. It is best to tell you of this, that our reunion may be fortified against all assaults. Are we not here upon our second honeymoon, the precious bond cemented by the remembrance of a dreadful separation? God is with us now: on earth we shall never more be parted.'

'But for me the parting would not have occurred,' sighed Mr Stapleton. 'You believe in my sincere penitence, Mary? Without your aid, I should have slipped back, back, back—who can tell whither?'

'All we have passed through has been sent to try our faith, our frail humanity. With constant communion, who knows but we might have wearied of each other? In every dispensation, let us recognise a Higher ruling, according to His Will. Think also, Claud, how not alone our own lives have been blessed. The circle has widened, taking in these others whose presence here is such a joy to us. Tears have given way to laughter; the strain of worry to contentment, peace. Only one dark cloud remains to mar the brightness—a father, who is still unsaved. Could they but bring him home to them, our bliss would be

complete. I can see how those two fret about him, reproaching themselves—unjustly, I consider—with not having sought him sooner. But Heaven is merciful. He may yet be found, ere it is too late. Do you mind being left alone, Claud? Mr Hossack has, you see, found the magnet of love even more powerful than the attractions of the planets.'

'Do not be long, my Mary. Each moment we are parted is now a torture to me.'

'Rest assured, I will soon be back. I have promised these innocents a peep at the tables. It is well they should look upon the seamy side of human nature sometimes. Were I afraid of their contamination, I would sooner die than introduce them to such a scene. Their purity will protect them.'

This public room was only a miniature hell compared with some. But there was quite enough rakishness about it to give a very fair notion of its more frequented rivals. If the crowd collected round that seductive board of green cloth were small, the company of gamblers were none the less disreputable, try as many of them might to hide their greed under an air of affected indifference. How anybody with an atom of self-respect or control could sit night after night—worse still, day after day—in that sickly, perfume-laden atmosphere, within a stone's-throw of the glorious sea and its bracing ozone, it puzzled those sensible young people to conceive. But they did sit there by dozens, until their passion became such a disease that they found it difficult to tear themselves away. Old and wrinkled players, inured to every form of excitement and dissipation, elbowed those with whose brows the tell-tale finger of Time had as yet dealt gently. Who could watch the eager, hungry looks of

those infatuated creatures without an infinite pity? There must be but one ending to an indulgence in a vice, at once so alluring and insidious, as many would find to their cost sooner or later, let fortune smile ever so sweetly now upon *copurchic* or poor frail, painted creature. To those refined, tender-hearted onlookers it was a sad picture indeed. They turned from it in pain and disgust.

‘Let us come away, please ; the sight is too touching,’ Nora whispered to Mary Stapleton. ‘Grievous as it is to watch those weak-minded persons, it is doubly trying when the impulse to endeavour to convince them of their folly is denied. I scarcely dare reopen the subject, but might I not walk round the table just once, and offer a few copies of that stirring pamphlet “The Halter of Sin,” for the acceptance of my fellow-countrymen. I would be so quiet and unobtrusive.’

Mary knew scarcely whether to laugh or cry at this naïve proposition.

‘It would be quite useless, my child ; I cannot stand by and see you exposed to insult. We have seen enough ; let us go, by all means. See, the others have already left.’

‘I do not anticipate any repulse. In the more squalid districts of North London I have had to encounter much marked opposition, which I have frequently been permitted to overcome,’ urged Nora. ‘Do grant me this small favour, Mary.’

‘I cannot hear of such a thing, much as I admire your persistency. Never fear, you will find plenty of occasion for circulating your treasures amongst the natives. Come, now, I’ll relent so far as to translate a few of them into model French for you if you like.’

Nora brightened at this concession on Mary's part.

'I shall hold you to that promise, remember. With a stirring equivalent, I might secure a most abundant harvest. I may meet some of these reckless ladies and gentlemen on the sands to-morrow, when, with your permission, I will approach them individually. I imagine you cannot offer any objection to that?'

'I make no rash promises. You may try your method on the villagers, or some of the Provençal's customers first, by way of experiment. But you don't expect me to master so deep a subject as "The Halter of Sin" in a night, do you?'

'No, indeed. To meet anticipated difficulties, I have provided myself with those of Miss De Brown's brochures I considered appropriate. As you may know, they have met with much deserved popularity in the Belleville quarter of Paris.'

'Really? They must be the very sort, then, to hasten the reform of a confirmed gamester.'

'Although, it is true, they are more particularly directed towards the conversion of inebriates, there are passages convincing enough to stir the feelings of the most inveterate gambler. I fear the vices mentioned have much in common; that the slaves of them are both notoriously difficult of access. Well, we must hope for the best.'

'By all means do that, my dear.'

As the two passed from the building on to the terrace, Mary almost brushed the sleeve of a man who stood under the shadow of the balcony. For a moment her eye rested upon features appalling in their recklessness and despair. Pale, haggard, prematurely lined, that terrible face seemed to reflect a conscience dead to all sense of honour or principle.

This must be some poor fellow fallen into the lowest depths of degradation through play. He was ruined, doubtless; a social wreck, a mortal without a friend to hold out a hand to save him from the results of his own folly, or tell of Pardon and Hope for the most degraded sinner. There, in letters of fire the dullest, most careless might read, was an awful lesson; a living, tangible example of one of God's creatures entrapped by the foul snares of the gaming-table. Mary took this in at a glance: it was not the first time, by a long way, she had come across such a wreck. But she must hurry her demure little companion on lest so repellent a sight upset her. Mary was not one to pass by in pharisaical hypocrisy. She meant to enlist the services of those good men who were with her now—they must come to the succour of this compatriot. Reason might be already dethroned, his life trembling in the balance, for aught she knew. Had not Mary herself known the fearful temptation to take it away when starvation stared her in the face?

‘Isn't that a relief? How people can stew for hours in that stuffy den passes my comprehension. Where are our gentlemen, I wonder? Why, what's the matter, Nollekins?’

Well might Mary ask. For Nora stood by her side as if rooted to the spot. She was almost as pale as the figure she regarded so intently. As if in a dream, she involuntarily plucked at Mary's skirt.

‘It is he!’ came slowly from between the pretty lips. ‘Does he not see or understand? What a dazed, unearthly look! But I must rouse him; he may be ill. Call Shirley, Nevill, all of them. Oh misery, that I should not have found him sooner.’

'What are you saying, dear? It is only some stranger. Presently they shall offer him assistance. You are a wee bit overstrung this evening, I fancy. It was selfish of me to try your strength further after so fatiguing a day.'

Nora drew herself proudly up, saying,—

'Do not fear for me; I am strong and well. God be thanked that, even at the eleventh hour, my prayer is heard.'

She let go her hold of Mary's dress. Before the elder could interpose, Nora, with firm step, approached the man. She touched him lightly on the shoulder.

'Father! It is your own Nora who has found you, she who was always your favourite. Surely you will not thrust her from you?'

Henry Wodehouse was quite in the mood for it—he even raised his hand to strike her. So desperate was he, that he considered the presence of this daughter, from whom he had been so long estranged—by her own wilful obstinacy, of course—only another bitter drop in the cup of his misfortune. What were any number of children to him, when the infernal 'system' he had elaborated with such exemplary patience had played him false? Had this meek little beggar turned up an hour sooner with a pile of 'cart-wheels,' he might have welcomed, even forgiven, her. Now she probably hadn't a franc to bless herself with. She looked just the sort of kid to be always poor. In England, no doubt, she went about snivelling and preaching in a poke-bonnet and cotton gloves, wasting any money she might earn on a pack of paupers, whilst her parent was left to well-nigh starve. Favourite, indeed! Of all the obnoxious allusions, that was about the most ill-timed. He was sick of backing the

brutes ; in fact, he hadn't spotted a winner for weeks past. There was no blinking the fact that he was regularly cleaned out—stone-broke his pals at 'Tom's' would have called it. Under the circumstances, he did not care much what became of him. '*Le jeu est fait. Rien ne vas plus,*' the monotonous croak of those precious thieves upstairs still rang in his ears. The words expressed his condition exactly. For if anybody's little game was 'made,' his was.

How different all would have been had he become a member of the *Cercle*. As it was, the stuck-up idiots on the committee had actually blackballed him—Henry Wodehouse, one of the boldest plungers at baccarat in Europe ; of course they feared his prowess at the game. How was a man of his tastes to exist on the beggarly allowance that skinflint of a lawyer remitted by the week? At last Henry had been forced to throw up the sponge. Life had no joys left for him now his 'system' had failed. He had struggled nobly in many varied channels ; the press, the turf, the promoter's sanctum, had all known him ; his career had been adventurous, chequered, but, alas, unremunerative. All said and done, it was a hollow, ungrateful world for men of genius ; the sooner he shuffled out of it the better. (Shuffled, somehow, did not sound a very nice word.) He had often considered the most gentlemanly method of slipping off the mortal coil. He had even gone so far as to rehearse in his mind the effect his decease would have upon the public if, for example, it took place at some foreign Casino. He persuaded himself he knew precisely what would happen. Of course the newspapers would make capital out of the affair, many treating their readers to a homily on the sin of gambling, taking Henry's hurried exit as

their text. There would be the usual startling paragraphs, with equally sensational headings, giving precise, but inaccurate, details of the catastrophe; the usual outcry from the puritans, with loud appeals for the instant closing of the tables, and suchlike twaddle. If he selected some quiet spot in England for the honour of his experiment, there would be an inquest, a verdict with that ridiculous reference to 'unsound mind,' when his sanity was as fully established as any of the yokels who sat upon him. As to anybody ever lamenting him, Henry was far too much a philosopher to contemplate it for an instant. In the world of dishonesty, lying and general humbug, in which he moved, people did not indulge in sentiment. Somebody at 'Tom's' or his old club would probably read the news, whistle, and exclaim, "Ullo, Henry Wodehouse has hopped the twig—case of suicide—tile loose, evidently. Gone the pace too fast. Poor old boy!" That would be about all the eulogium Henry ought to expect, although perchance a few of his rivals in journalistic circles might pay a passing, if sarcastic, tribute in print to his memory, in regard to his associations with the 'Pilot.' His daughters and that cub of a nephew? Yes, they would feel his loss keenly, as it was right they should do. They ought to have dealt more considerately with him. How often had he held out the olive branch of reconciliation only to be spurned? They would have themselves alone to thank for the qualms of conscience which must overtake them when they heard of his untimely end. But they also would forget all about him in time, as many other unappreciated men of talent had been forgotten.

Such were a few of the morbid reflections which were passing through Henry's befuddled senses as

that delicate touch startled him. His cogitations had also taken a practical turn, for, in case of accidents, Henry had provided himself with an elegant little toy in the shape of a loaded pistol—quite a creditable specimen of the gunmaker's art—should his inclinations prompt him to adopt this mode of self-destruction. There seemed to him a respectable, even gallant, notion in the employment of firearms under such circumstances. Just a pull at the trigger of the pretty weapon, and—well, if his hand didn't shake, it seemed the easiest thing imaginable—

'Father, father!' came the girl's soft pleading. 'If not for me, then for the sake of our darling who has gone before, look up and listen. No, dear, I shall not release my hold until I have your promise to be the same affectionate father as you were at first in Budleigh-Tarleton, before—before we went abroad, and our paths diverged so widely. You cannot conceive the extraordinary events which have occurred of late. Shirley and I will tell you all, if you will only return with us. Dear Nevill is here, Mr and Mrs Stapleton, and another gentleman, who is engaged to—but you shall hear everything presently. We only crossed from England last night; we are such a merry, happy assemblage, only wanting one more to complete our party. You will not disappoint us, father?'

What a rum little old-fashioned piece of goods this daughter of his had grown into. Henry wondered if the other one, Shirley, talked like a book. If so, their friends, whoever they were, must be having a lively time of it. Mr Wodehouse looked his daughter up and down as well as his addled senses would permit. If anything she seemed to have grown smaller since they parted after that troublesome interview in the

'Pilot's' office. What she lacked in stature she, however, certainly made up for in determination. She had grown prettier, too ; not quite Henry's style of beauty, but a doll-like, simple, innocent kind, which might attract some people. As Henry tried to meet her fixed scrutiny, it began to dawn upon him that perhaps, after all, there was a certain amount of luck in this unexpected meeting. She spoke of friends—they might be rich, not disinclined to put him on his legs again, if he played his cards properly. Or, with the exercise of his accustomed persuasiveness, this titled nephew might be got at with better results orally than through those niggardly lawyers. These young swells had a lot of influence. Why should not some cosy berth under Government, with nothing to do and plenty of pay, be found for one whose services deserved recognition, if anybody's did? Henry felt certain that a youth exposed to Neil's temptations would require an experienced head to manage his money matters for him. What financier better qualified than his uncle, who was up to every dodge of Moses & Company, being also gifted with unrivalled shrewdness in selecting the highest class of investments and following the vagaries of the stock markets? Henry would humour this daughter with the pale, earnest face, and eyes whose drilling powers somehow made him feel rather uncomfortable: it might have been his lost Celia pleading to him—the girl was her very image. Yes, after one more dram to steady his nerves, he would do as she wished. He couldn't be worse off than he was. He must dispel his fit of the dimals, which might develop into another attack of the jumps if he encouraged it.

What a very remarkable fact it was that these

searching eyes seemed to divine his intentions. More noteworthy still that, when the gentle pressure on the arm increased, and the calm voice said, 'No, father; this tendency to over-indulgence in stimulants has been your ruin; I will stand between you and your tempter to-night,' Henry meekly obeyed. Strangest enchantment of all, as Nora, with that soft touch—turned by some mysterious means into a grip of iron—still upon him, added, 'I have something urgent to say to you, dear; walk quietly beside me down to the beautiful sea,' the man, who but now was desperate enough to have considered taking his own life, was led off like a lamb at his daughter's bidding!

The sea. Henry had forgotten he was near it even. He had endured such a precious dose of the briny crossing from Jersey that he would not have pined away had he never beheld it again. He was a landsman born and bred, loving gas, excitement, company. What on earth people could find to admire in a lot of green water, always tumbling about in a way which made him giddy, he failed to understand, any more than what his daughter wanted with him at that particular moment. Perhaps she was luring him on to drown himself. Well, there might be uglier methods of self-destruction than that. Whatever her plans, she gripped his arm firmly, guiding him cleverly over the treacherous promenade, down some steps, and past those symmetrically arranged ghostly tree stumps, the contemplation of which always gave Henry the shivers: they seemed to grow out of the earth like the remains of some haunted primeval forest.

'I think it scarcely probable we shall be disturbed here,' Nora remarked, as she stopped after some ten minutes' walk over the sands. 'How remarkably still

the ocean is. I imagine, however, with the turn of the tide, it will become more restless. Can you guess what I have invited you down here for, father? You need not tremble so, there is nothing to fear. What passes between us to-night is a secret nothing shall drag from me. You may notice I am quite collected. Therefore mine is no empty promise.'

Fear, indeed, to a man who had gone through the vicissitudes Henry had! There was something very rich in the situation. A chit of a girl, who looked as if the first puff of wind would blow her away, lecturing one of his stamp—and getting the better of him, too!

'I have remarked that during our interview at the *Etablissement* you have constantly trifled with something in your breast-pocket' continued Nora; 'you must give it me, please.'

This was coming it rather too strong. Henry tried to brace himself up, saying with a cynical smile,—

'My very dear child, what could I possibly have to conceal? Our singular meeting may have unhinged my nerves somewhat, they were never of the strongest; and I have gone through a peck of trouble, my love. That is all.'

'It grieves me to find you still prone to evasion. I repeat, what passes between us this night is sacred. But if we are to crown this Heaven sent recognition with joy in the future, you must disguise nothing from me now. Give me what you have there instantly.'

Would wonders never cease? Henry's fingers actually closed upon his pistol and brought it from its hiding-place. The girl seemed positively to grow taller in her courage and resolution as she stood upon those lonely sands. She never winced, but kept her eyes fixed firmly upon her parent's.

‘Only a pretty plaything, you see, my Nora ; certainly not worth while making such a fuss about. We men are sometimes obliged to carry such popguns for our self-defence. My humble lodgings are situated in a very squalid street, where, I am sorry to say, dishonest people abound.’

‘I always consider an Englishman’s fists a far safer and more reliable protection in cases of emergency than a recourse to firearms. It is certainly an elegant weapon. Scarcely, however, a desirable companion to carry into crowded assemblages. There,’ as with a sudden skilful turn of the wrist the girl possessed herself of the toy, ‘I am sure you must feel much more at ease without it. Oh, father, father, that it should have come to this!’

Close to where the two stood was a mole running out some distance into the sea. Before Mr Wodehouse could recover from his astonishment, Nora had mounted the stonework, and was hurrying along it. At the extremity she turned and looked back. Then, with a strength few would have given her credit for, she raised her arm and flung the pistol into the water.

Her purpose achieved, she returned slowly. Her voice was solemn as she said, ‘He who watches over us has constituted me His Agent to save you from a crime too awful to contemplate. Your soul must no longer remain stubborn ; the fervour of your gratitude must be boundless. Throw yourself upon His clemency, my father : no sins are so dark but He will purify them. Presently, when we go back to the hotel, your little Nora and the parent she has found again will kneel and join their prayers together in thankfulness. Will they not?’

What was there about this child, whose firm, yet

gentle words found their way so swiftly to Henry Wodehouse's heart, to silence its rebellion, to reach his inner self? Nora was simply putting her rule in practice of endeavouring to awaken the good which she believed existed in every human being, however low he might have fallen. With a steady patience she meant to lead her father's thoughts to the days when—remote and short-lived though they were—happiness reigned in their Devonshire home; to that time before the demon of speculation, with its tribe of inevitable miseries, turned a weak vessel into the tool of designing men, to make the very name of home a mockery. She must rouse a feeling of shame within his breast that his talents had been employed in such unholy work; a loving wife deserted, driven abroad by his neglect; his children exposed to unmerited privation. It was a just and wholesome lesson that he should be made to feel all this at the hand of his daughter. It was no part of Nora's creed that the evil-doer should go unpunished. She fully recognised how the stings of conscience were most useful elements for man's reform. She did not, therefore, propose to tone down the sins of which he had been guilty. By showing them in all their hideousness, she hoped to induce a more sincere repentance. Sweet and forbearing though she was, little Nora could not stifle the remembrance of the cruel neglect under which their mother had laboured, or forget—even if she might forgive—the husband's inhuman conduct when the Almighty had thought fit to release their darling from her sufferings. Recriminations or reproaches were foreign to her nature. But the bitter memory of that unchristian act was difficult indeed to kill.

Nora's plans were thus fully defined. When she looked at her father and saw the bowed, averted head, she knew that with the removal of that ghastly temptation the initial difficulties of her task were over. She must follow up the success she had gained by stimulating his self-respect, stirring his pride, even encouraging tears of penitence. Had not one soul, now in their own intimate circle, been but recently rescued? Nothing must daunt her efforts to win this other to the true fold, in God's good time and method.

So intent had Nora been on her labour of love, that she did not notice the presence of Mary Stapleton within a few paces of her.

It was scarcely remarkable that the latter, after witnessing so dramatic an incident as the recognition, should have wished to follow up events. There was a decided spice of romance, not to say adventure, about the business which might call for her aid. Certainly it would be a cowardly act to desert little Nora then, much as Mary detested playing the spy over anybody. In her eyes cavesdropping was an equally objectionable habit. But Nora's agonised appeal of 'Father!'—an exclamation which struck the key-note of the whole affair—might have been heard by others than the watchful Mary.

She would stand by her friend, for she read danger in the attitude of this man, who seemed as one at bay, disgraced and reckless. Mary's quick intelligence instantly interpreted Mr Wodehouse's uneasiness. A body ruined by excess, manhood disgraced, the rudder of Faith and Religion lacking to strengthen the tottering barrier between right and wrong, to what lengths would he not go? At what foul deed would he stop short, even to the attempt upon a daughter's life?

Mary's first impulse was to rush forward and drag Nora—unconscious possibly of the risk she herself underwent—from so imminent a peril. As swiftly she saw the rashness of such an act. Were the gamester really armed, it would only infuriate him the more, leading maybe to terrible consequences. Mary must creep nearer the two, follow them where they went, watch them as a lynx, ready with practical help in case of need. Loving solicitude for Nora's safety lent her cunning. She contrived to follow close at their heels, unobserved, until, hiding behind a rock, she beheld that splendid triumph of filial devotion and piety over the wiles of the Devil and of Sin.

With fervent gratitude Mary sank upon her knees to offer up her tribute of praise and thankfulness.

She might leave those two alone now in the presence of their Maker. All fear was passed. God would crown His daughter's work as best pleased Him.

As stealthily as she had come, Mary Stapleton crept back. Anxious hearts beat for her return ; there were many concerned inquiries after little Nora. She was almost hysterical in her answer after the excitement she had undergone.

'All is well. How blessed has the visit here already been ! There is a bright time coming for all of us. Listen, my Shirley,' as Mary drew the young girl to her and whispered something in her ear. 'Is not that brave news, my darling?'

CHAPTER X.

UNION.

THE sun was shining fiercely down from out of a cloudless sky upon the German Florence. Under its cheering rays the Saxon city looked its very best. Quite dazzling was the fast-flowing Elbe, alive with the daily burthen of steamer and ferry-boats, to say nothing of the tugs, with their long tail of barges, so cleverly worked up stream on the rattling chain, which might have been a telegraph cable everlastingly being paid out at the tug's stern. Animated also were the streets and bridges, whilst many a copper roof glistened in their varied play of colour like gorgeous beetle wings.

‘It is the same dear old place, scarcely altered save perhaps in wealth of loveliness—do you not find it so, Nevill?’ little Nora is asking as she raises her wistful eyes to her cousin, who is now her husband. ‘It might be the identical morning some years ago when Shirley and I paused at this spot to watch the preparations for the *Vogelschiessen*. This is, you may recollect, a sort of annual fair, with that element of solemnity about it so frequently affected by Germans when indulging in amusement. Yes, except that the summer is on the wane, the touch of autumn already upon the trees, it might be the self-same day—’

'With a few slight changes, little woman?' interrupts the titled bridegroom, smiling down.

'Certainly many remarkable experiences have been crowded into a comparatively brief space of time. Grief, worldly reverses, necessitating our employment in unaccustomed channels, the contraction of many, I trust, lasting friendships, this extraordinary change in your position, which I can even now scarcely realise, much unalloyed happiness—we have formed acquaintance with them all.'

'Remembering always that this is the joyful period, wifey. When I look back and think of the infliction I must have been to you as a school-boy, I marvel at the capacity of your forgiveness in enduring me under present conditions.'

'You see, I have always been deeply attached to you, Nevill. Sometimes I have tried to picture my desolation had anything occurred to part us. Yet you, who are so gifted, must have formed an ideal of womanhood far, far different to my insignificant self. You will never hesitate to rectify my faults, or scruple to chide me, if you consider it necessary? I would accept every reprimand with humility, even gratitude.'

'My darling, do not talk so. It is little Nora who must correct my endless failings. She is my ideal of womanhood. Why, yonder are the very gardens whose orange trees can bear witness that I speak the truth: in the days of my youth have I not told you so many, many times?'

'That is true. But we were so volatile, and, I fear, unstable then.'

'Rather, have we not proof positive to the contrary? As we have been destined for each other from the first, we must make the best of the bargain.'

‘I have no fear as to the result, my husband. I am thine, thou art mine—we twain are one. It is only the dread, which constantly oppresses me, lest in the future I may be unable to occupy my proper station as I ought without being a tax upon you by reason of my nervousness and weakly constitution.’

‘To overcome those difficulties, have we not agreed to reside abroad for a year, just to grow accustomed to our altered circumstances, and to retrench? My impression is this countess will accept the arduous duties more readily than her spouse, who already begins to feel his distinction oppressive. True hearts are more than coronets, and simple Faith than Norman blood, my Nora.’

‘Yes, indeed.’ Then Nora continued, after a pause: ‘I daresay you will think me very ungrateful, Neil, dear. But I often wish this inheritance had not come to you. It would be such a grievous thing were your poetical aspirations hampered by the claims of birth and proprietorship. Perhaps it is stretching a point to insist that all poets should be needy. But, I imagine, to give their genius full scope, they ought to be exempt from all mundane vexations.’

Neil laughed outright.

‘Why what has come over you this morning, little countess? I suppose you will tell me next poets have no business with wives; that I am an extremely unlucky fellow to be plagued with a sympathetic, long-suffering companion, who sits by the hour listening to my effusions, correcting my impetuosity with masterly criticisms. Now I come to consider the matter, perhaps I should get along better alone after all.’

‘Ah, now you are teasing me, Nevill. Even in

jest, pray do not talk of separation—my heart seems to stand still at the bare possibility.'

A world of affection spoke in Neil's eyes as he looked down upon his helpmate.

'My Nora! As if such a thing could ever happen. Now we are on the subject of poetry, I will tell you something I meant to keep as a surprise until Shirley and Robert joined us. By the way, that was quite a brilliant idea of yours suggesting they should meet us here.'

'I am so glad you approve the arrangement. Besides being the spot we spent so much of our time at once, it is where we first made the acquaintance of our benefactor, kind Mr Edward Foster, who is now no more.'

'Of course it was. Dear old guardian, how much do I not owe to him. Would he were with us still, to witness our union.'

'The recollection of his bounty can never fade. Had he not taken us by the hand, I tremble to think what might have become of us. Your surprise, what is it, Nevill?'

'Prepare yourself for an amazing one. Are you ready? Well, Mr Lafont has, subject to some slight alterations, accepted my poem, "Alithea." Can you now wonder at my capers this morning when you evidently thought I had taken leave of my senses? You see, therefore, madam, a poet and an aristocrat is not such an impossible combination after all.'

'Accepted; I am overjoyed! How relieved you must feel after all your suspense. Oh, husband, what a joyful day is this. Will you credit it, I too have been keeping something back? What that is you could never guess. My most serious effort, "The Valley of Sin and those who walk through it un-

scathed," has at length found a purchaser in Mr Walbrook of Booksellers' Court. True, the remuneration is not excessive. But it is the sense of appreciation which is so gratifying ; it offers such an incentive to renewed exertions.'

'Bravo, my clever little wife ; I am glad indeed. We shall be celebrities, after all, if we don't mind. Robert's last book has, I hear, made a great hit. Now even he will have to look to his laurels. Here he comes, with Shirley more radiant than ever.'

The young bride certainly did look radiant with happiness. Neil might likewise have applied other adjectives, such as bright, natural, airy, graceful, fresh, to describe his cousin's appearance.

'Well, young people, we've seen no end of sights whilst you two have been writing love sonnets, I expect,' was Shirley's greeting, treating them to her favourite charity-bob. 'Haven't we, Robert? I suppose you would be angry if I called this Sleepy Hollow, but I never saw a city less changed in my life. It's just as friendly as ever, though, and they let people take a short cut through the palace yard, as if it belonged to them : I always feel quite grand when I emerge into Castle Street. Would you believe it, Nollekins, the Kroncs still vegetate over their drug-shop? The old gentleman was smoking his pipe out of window as we passed—with Fräulein Olga doubtless eating sausages in the background—as if five years ago was only last week. The same dumpy sentinel stood at the watch-house, the same solemn policemen were ready to pop you into prison if you walked across the Augustus Bridge on the wrong side. The Italian village looked as if it must slip into the Elbe, as I feel sure it will do some day. Nothing altered a bit. We

went into the dungeon—Green Vaults, I mean—and saw those wonderful treasures I should enjoy looking at so much more if they did not keep them in such a creepy place. After that we did the outsides of the shops, until Robert stuck fast in Herr Oberthur's library, which I had weakly allowed him to enter. How many times have I tried to convince the assistant there that novels do exist other than those reproduced by Baron Tauchnitz. Alas, he was as dense as ever—hadn't even heard of Robert's latest: wasn't that disgraceful? When, at last, I coaxed my worthy husband away, the morning was nearly gone. But we were determined to call on that sweet Miss Smith who has given so many Stunden as to have nearly forgotten her own language: isn't it funny when people do that? Unfortunately she was out. Coming back, we dropped in at the Beau-Site for letters, but there were none. I did hope to have heard from Mary. I suppose she is too busy with her articles. I do wish the porter at our hotel was not so like Mr Corney Grain. I never can talk seriously to him. Can anybody tell me why the English make such frights of themselves abroad? I should think we met a dozen in as many minutes, whose costumes were perfectly hideous. I consider it an insult to dress like that in such a beautiful city as this. Didn't we walk quickly up High Street, Robert? However, here we are. What have the earl and countess really been doing with themselves? I can't reconcile myself a bit to your being such swells, so it's no use. Neil and Nollekins you'll both be until the end of the chapter.'

Rattling on thus with her ripple of fun and laughter, Shirley paused, presumably for want of breath.

'Why should we not be, Mrs Hossack?' laughed

his lordship. 'I hope the day is far distant when we shall be anything else. At anyrate, out here we are unfettered by the trammels of society. Let us enjoy our liberty of speech whilst we can.'

'So we will. But I expect it will be more difficult to escape from Musselburgh than you imagine. You're a laird now, are you not, Neil? Such a title must bring awful responsibilities with it; it's nearly as fine as being a thane or a Highland chieftain, I should think. A laird! It scarcely seems fair to saddle a youth with such a weight thus early in life. Doesn't it make you feel very uncomfortable?'

'Not in the least. I am quite reconciled to my fate now Nora has consented to share it with me.'

'No accession of wealth, power or distinction, could ever alter my Nevill's unostentatious nature, I am sure,' remarked the countess. 'My husband will view everything from a poet's standpoint. He will rise above sordid motives, mere worldly ambitions, or I do not know him.'

'There is a splendid character for you, cousin. If I added that you were practical and generous, with an old head on young shoulders, I suppose you would blush, and retire into your bashful shell instantly. But it struck me as a thoughtful, kindly act to purchase the lease of Prospect Cottage in order that Miss Pridham might end her days in peace there, with the relative she has secured from Devonshire in place of Eliza, the irresponsible, who has married the butcher boy. Nor was it quite a selfish proceeding to journey all the way to Musselburgh to instal dear papa as your agent.'

To which compliments Nora added her contribution.

'Nor can we ever forget—I am sure Mary never

will—how you exerted your influence to secure Mr Stapleton's election as secretary to the Total Abstinence Home, an appointment he fills with such credit to his employers, and doubtless satisfaction to himself—responsible posts these which some unchristianlike people might say it was rather tempting Providence for these gentlemen to hold in these early days of their reformation. Needless to say the idea of such risk never entered these young folk's heads.

It may be recorded here that Robert, laggard in love though he may have been, now atoned for his dilatoriness by a devotion to his wife quite exemplary. He hung upon her every word, anticipated her slightest wish. If his grave character—the outcome of much loneliness, study and self-repression—rendered him quiet and shy, he was far from being a drag upon the party. Even if he were at times dull, it might be forgiven one who was so staunch, the soul of honour and integrity, a fond husband, in a word, a gentleman.

He saw all things in respect of his past conduct clearly now. What could have possessed him to carry his diffidence to such excess? When he looked back and considered the danger to his peace of mind he had courted, the risk of losing this dear companion, he reproached himself that he should have allowed the bondage of his profession to overmaster him thus; to imperil not only his own, but his Shirley's happiness. He recognised how he had been culpably blind—even wicked. God had indeed been merciful to have permitted him to win, instead of lose, so great a prize. By every dutiful homage and self-sacrifice he must show his unfeigned gratitude for so inestimable a boon.

Yet, with all Robert's shortcomings, Shirley might consider herself a lucky young person to be mated to

such a man. That she appreciated her good-fortune none could question, who looked upon her bonnie face or heard her joyous laugh. It does not fall to the lot of every girl to marry her first, her only love. But it had been Shirley's blissful experience. Thrown frequently together, dwelling under the same roof, with opportunities of watching how gallantly he met his many reverses without a rebellious word, always considerate, thoughtful, plodding on to the goal of a worthy ambition, so strong in Faith and moral worth, small wonder that respect ripened into deeper feelings. Of Shirley's torture when Robert left the Cottage abruptly only those can tell who have passed through similar fires. But he had come back to her. Oh, the joy of his return! How true had been the simple words, coming straight from the girl's heart, 'I have loved you, Robert, since we met.' How her whole soul went forth to him in that tender embrace. There would be no torturing doubts, no need for deception now. All the wretched gnawing uncertainties were gone for ever. He was hers—until the end; a husband to be worshipped, trusted, esteemed. It was almost a pleasure to think they were not rich. Her voice, which had been so useful all along, might still be employed for their mutual benefit. He would work with his pen, his wife sing all day, if need be—what hardship could there be in that?

Nora and Neil's positions were very different. They were independent, and her sister, not being very strong, it was quite desirable to gain health before she accepted the claims of her high estate. So they were going to remain abroad for a year. The parting with Nollekins would, of course, be dreadful. But what was a short year? It would pass so quickly. Perhaps—dared Shirley whisper it even to herself?—Heaven would

further sanctify their union by sending her someone to be fondled and trained up in her husband's dear footsteps? Into some baby ears Shirley might be allowed to tell also of the sainted mother who slept in this same city; of a memory to look back upon with reverence: of deeds, examples to strive and emulate. Little Nora and she were to go up that very afternoon again, alone, and pray beside the hillock for fortitude to fight the good fight as she had done, so to shape their lives in the future as she would wish.

Zu früh, du traurig, stiller Hügel,
Fällt der Wehmuth Thräne auf dich hin.

The words were cut deep into the marble cross, deeper still into the sisters' hearts. Death was made beautiful up there in that peaceful cemetery, where the very flowers appeared to catch the breath and purity of Heaven, the dark cypress trees stood as sentries over the sleepers—until the final Uprising. To visit that God's-acre was a pilgrimage dutiful, if sad—yet where the pain, where the sorrow, save for those who mourned and waited?

'You remember our sacred engagement for this afternoon, sister? I would rather we went alone this time,' little Nora said softly.

'Could I forget? Believe, me I shall not fail. All is arranged. Our husbands will fetch us when we have left our tributes—there.'

'You are always my right hand, Shirley. Willingly would I spend more prayerful hours in those hallowed grounds did I not know that it is wrong to weep and grieve excessively. Can we ever thank the Schmolzes enough for their goodness in carrying out our desires? If ever resting-place were made lovely, it is our darling's tiny garden, with its low marble rim.'

The window eyelets were peeping out of the shelving ochre-coloured roofs of the old houses which fringe the river's bank near the well-worn bridge. As the sun went down in splendour, many a spire caught some lingering ray and held it captive, as if loth to part therewith even until another morn. Amidst the stillness and the shadows those four had a fancy to linger, where, for some of them, many youthful hours had been spent. There they sat and talked, with bated breath, of the days which had fled. Until darkness stole over Dresden, and lights began to twinkle everywhere. What a dream it all seemed! Except for that loss irreparable, a delicious, entrancing dream. Who would have ventured to foretell the extraordinary changes which had come about? A new era of love, union, content, seemed stretched out before them.

'I am wondering if it is wicked to feel so happy, Nevill,' breathed little Nora, her head upon her husband's breast.

'To think that once I never knew you, Robert,' whispered Shirley.

'This is the identical seat where you composed your first verses, dear,' continued Nora; 'I remember them so well. The subject was a boyish one, with, I fear, not much depth, unlike your present noble themes. Still, there was decided promise of better things to come. We must rejoice that my prophecy has been fulfilled. I may venture to say we have become quite a literary family.'

'All except myself, fair countess,' interrupted Shirley. 'I remain the same impulsive, unreliable person as always. If I couldn't sing tolerably well, I should be a positive noodle.'

'But, then, you have atoned for your deficiencies by

marrying a shining light of the profession, cousin. A man who can write powerful books, and articles on important political questions, must surely possess enough versatility for two. Were it not for his excessive modesty, I might instance other qualifications to prove that you have made a lucky choice. Some people might even consider a young woman who can trill and shake with such brilliancy as to be likened to a nightingale—to say nothing of drawing tears and laughter at will from the coldest of audiences—a wife not to be despised.'

'Cousin, cousin, now you are an earl, a laird, and the owner of an historical name, you really must give up chaffing. It is a singular fact that this skylark—by the way, we must look up Herr Kübler, who paid me that compliment—feels dreadfully hungry. To descend to the prosaic, suppose we go in to supper.'

Honeymoons are presumably periods which do not lag. For these united ones the time positively flew. Quite as a shock, to their great astonishment, the limit of their holiday-making was reached. It was incredible they had been in Saxony a whole month; that they must now commence the battle of their lives in real earnest. They were reminded of the fact by the receipt of a letter from Mary Stapleton, full of pleasant banter and gossip. Mary told of the penance she was undergoing at their lodgings in Thanet Place, for dear Claud to be near his office, the writer within better touch of journalism. She also hinted that unless Mrs Hossack returned speedily, her friend's health might be seriously impaired by undue fretting. She also wanted to know if it was still the couple's intention to make the neighbourhood of Camden or Kentish Towns their place of abode. If so, whether

Claud should not take the omnibus up after his work and secure rooms for them in one or other of those districts? ‘You see,’ wrote Mary, ‘Prospect Cottage will be within a walk. I am sure Miss Pridham will expect many visits, with detailed accounts of all these remarkable events. I understand the good soul suffers much from lumbago. So, in your new part of housewife, you must go armed with plenty of remedies. Now something for your private ear, though you may tell Mr Hossack. Mr Ferguson is engaged to the eldest Miss Jackson, who worked that gorgeous altar cloth for St Cyprian’s! Fancy the meek little man ever plucking up courage to propose. Of course ill-natured creatures say Miss Jackson helped him over the style, but—who will believe them? Now I will drop Mr Ferguson. Do you recollect that handsome Captain Hepburn, with his Scotch terrier, whom we met at Salamé? Well, I have found out that he has behaved so nobly to me. As I have frequently told you, there was a mystery about the payments for my schooling at Budleigh-Tarleton, which Phœbe and Susan never would divulge. “I was not to bother my head about the matter,” was all I could ever extract from them. The mystery has at last been cleared up. It was this John Hepburn who used to send the money from India for my education! It seems that my sainted mother nursed him with heroic devotion through some dreadful illness, when cowards had left him through fear of infection. John Hepburn never forgot that he owed his life to my darling. Quartered in the island, he remained throughout my parents’ most devoted friend. When poor father died—some say of a broken heart, owing to the calamity which in a single night destroyed his plantations, and ruined him—this

good fellow stood by my mother in her grief. He it was who closed her eyes when God so soon after called her also to Him. John Hepburn from that day constituted himself my unrecognised protector. I was in England, a lonely, wayward child, with only dim reflections of love and home, from which requirements of health had cruelly driven me. But, although he was thousands of miles distant, this soldier held faithful to his trust. I have learnt all this from Susan Hollebhone, who considered the time had arrived when I ought to know: the kindly spinster came up to London on purpose to tell me. You will understand how amazed I have been by this strange revelation. I could not rest until I had seen John Hepburn, to pour out my thanks for these services beyond all price. Dear Claud sought him out at his club, and brought him here yesterday. Never have I met one so absolutely unselfish, so oblivious of his own good deeds. When I strove to kiss his hand, in unfeigned gratitude, he was overcome with emotion, appearing quite unnerved. He turned his head aside. From some unaccountable cause, he broke down and hurried away. This morning brought me a note, worded in an almost affectionate manner, with fervent wishes for our abiding happiness. In it he says that to-morrow he sails for the Cape; he may be absent "a long, long while." I cannot express how sorry Claud and I are that my benefactor was obliged to leave England so soon, just as we had hoped to prove ourselves so sincerely grateful by every means in our power. But it was not to be, and we must wait patiently for his return. I recollect a similar extraordinary embarrassment when we met at Salamé. His conduct is indeed inexplicable. Possibly his long residence in hot

climates may have affected his nerves, or the sight of me recalled too rudely the painful circumstances I have mentioned. Whatever the cause, I can never, never forget his generosity to me, or cease to pray for his welfare.'

Then Mary went on to relate how worthily Mr Stapleton filled his duties in connection with the Home; how he had already gained the committee's confidence, introducing many improvements for the social benefit of the inmates. Only lately, at the Annual Tea-Meeting, her husband's health had been proposed by a well-known philanthropist, with graceful acknowledgments of indebtedness to their new secretary. In his reply, Claud had shown a command of platform language, with an elegant mode of delivery, in which much quiet humour peeped out, few would have given him credit for.

'Is not all this gratifying, Shirley, dear?' Mary proudly asked.

From the unpromising materials at one time at Mr Stapleton's disposal, it must be frankly acknowledged that results were not only gratifying but surprising.

'Susie Cone, of Virginia State, has been here quite often,' continued Mary. 'I am not naturally of a jealous turn of mind, but she says so many nice things about you and Nollekins, that there is danger of my annexing that miserable vice if you do not come back very soon. Poor Susie! Hers must have been a lonely existence. She made me her confidante the other day. Such a sad, sad tale it was, in which man's deceit and selfishness played, as usual, the chief parts. Think of Susie, of all others, falling a victim to the tender passion, enduring disappointments which would have soured any ordinary woman. I always fancied

she had a history, but never dreamt it was so sorrowful a one as this. All her study and travel have failed to kill the past. I am afraid she is blighted beyond hope of cure. Of course I sought to console her with such trite proverbs as there being as many good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, and so on, adding how men were an odious set of mortals, not worth a moment's consideration. But she only shook her head dolefully, and sighed. Nor could I but acknowledge how weak my arguments were when I turned the mirror upon myself. Poor Susie Cone! I am truly sorry for her. Well, I think, that pretty well exhausts my stock of news. Do not fail to tell me of your plans. Claud will be only too pleased to go house-hunting for you, if you will but say the word.' Then, after many fond messages, Mary closed her letter.

Shirley ran with it to her sister, who was sitting in the shady Beau-Site garden, beside which the ever-busy Elbe flowed on.

'Countess, what do you think? We have been here a month, and it only seems a week! Isn't it dreadful? We, Robert and I, must return at once—to-morrow, if not to-day. And—oh! darling, we shall have to leave you behind.'

'I was afraid you forgot how the time was speeding. I could not bring myself to remind you. Yes, we shall have to part for a space. Let us rejoice that the separation will only be for a year, perhaps not so long, if you can spare a short holiday at Easter. There is ground for rejoicing that we take leave of each other in a city which is so dear to us. Nevill will, doubtless, have occasion to visit Scotland on business matters connected with his property.'

‘I daresay he will. But Neil is not little Nora any more than Scotland is England. Please, what will become of you when the earl is away?’

‘Miss Smith has promised to come daily to read German, and aid me to improve my conversation where I am sadly at fault. The irregular verbs puzzle me almost as much as before I was married.’

‘Did you expect matrimony to turn you out as perfect a scholar, then, as you are a model wifey and pamphleteer? What an odd puss it is!’ laughed Shirley. ‘But I must go and drag Robert out of the reading-room. Why didn’t he wake me up before. We have had a few amiable differences already. Now there will be a downright squabble. Oh, yes, there will, my lady. Whilst I am gone, here is Mary’s letter to amuse you, although it is not all gay. There are lots of surprises as well. So you must look out.’

‘Away,’ there was both gladness and sorrow in the word. Joy, because it roused her resolutions into action: Shirley must stand worthily by her husband’s side, proud in her honour and allegiance to the good man she had married. Sadness, for she must nerve herself to the first real parting from her sister she had ever been called upon to make. Through childhood, as girls, now as grow-up women, the two had been as one in thought and confidence. The time was close at hand when a severance must occur. It would be wrong to seek excuses. Both had chosen their partners; there must be no display of weakness, all personal considerations must be set aside for the one grand duty. To cling to their husbands in all emergencies was a command to be implicitly obeyed. Nora, in her own deliberate, methodical fashion, had already prepared herself for the approaching ordeal.

She knew that to her less contemplative sister it would be a grievous trial. So the little woman had not only strengthened her own resolution, but primed herself with a loving, sisterly store of consolations—religious, persuasive, and even printed. Be it emphasised that in neither mind was there the slightest temptation to put off the dreaded hour : it had to be met, as all true wives should meet such claims, with dutiful submission. It was only that the wrench acted differently on the elder's and younger's temperaments. Each was determined that she would not break down before the other. They arrived at their respective decisions by opposite methods. Nora, with calm, if tearful, self-reasoning that the decree of Duty must be obeyed without a murmur. It might weaken her sister's firmness if she, who had so often obtruded her selfish whims upon those sympathetic ears, gave way at this supreme juncture. Shirley, when she had captured her husband, pleasantly twitted him with his neglect in not having made her consult the almanac oftener, and insisted on his deserting his puppets for the practical requirements of his most substantial wife during quite two days' travel, ran to her room and indulged in a good long cry. Thus, when the morrow came, and the inevitable good-bye had to be spoken, each sister was armed with characteristic weapons for saving the other from distress. Shirley, for her part, sought refuge in much voluble conversation.

'After profound cogitation, I have decided that it will be so much nicer when you and Neil are not bothered with us any more. So we are going back to England. You'll be able to make all your arrangements comfortably, without my stupid interference. Bless me, you'll adorn the station you've got to occupy

as if you had been born to it. With father's careful management, the estate is sure to improve rapidly. Then there will be no need to economise. You'll just sit down, enjoy the lovely scenery, breathe the invigorating air. Fancy anybody fretting about becoming a countess! Don't I wish I had had the chance, as I've told my absent-minded Robert more than once—'

Nora sighed.

'Willingly would I relinquish my rights in your favour, were it possible.'

'Of course you would, but you cannot, my dear. It's contrary to the laws of the country. I know it's an awful disappointment to you, but we can't help it. Do you recollect the "Traveller's Rest" at Tolkevitz, Nora? It is not a public-house, only that trellised villa with the wild garden in front, and orchard behind, where everything "flourishes in such unchecked profusion," as Robert so prettily observed—roses, marigolds, sweet-peas, geraniums, cherry-pie, sunflowers, all coming up where they like, such a wilderness of colour and unruliness. Well, a little bird has whispered to me that there is the possibility—mind, only the possibility—of a certain nobleman taking it for the whole of next summer, from the spring perhaps, when he brings his wife up from the south of France, where she is to astonish everybody by growing quite plump and strong in a very few weeks.'

'How kind and thoughtful Nevill is.'

'Who said you were the particular *Hochwohlgeboren*—isn't that a fine word? However, there's the "Rest" running to seed for somebody to cultivate; such an opportunity ought not to be missed.'

'What is that you say about the south of France,

Shirley? I thought Dinan was selected for our winter sojourn.'

Mrs Hossack elevated her nose at the idea.

'Picturesque, but dreadfully English resort, full of impecunious or reduced gentlefolk—not at all the place or the company for a countess. I took the liberty of convincing Neil of that very soon. Cannes, Nice, Mentone, much more appropriate; so warm for chilly Nollekins. Directly you are rid of us, you'll spread your wings and fly off like the swallows—away, away, away—whilst Robert and I are making our fortunes in smoky London. I've often thought, do you know, there are some love-birds who are born to bask in the sun all their days, and be petted. I verily believe you are one of them. But we mustn't sit here all the afternoon, or the train will be off without us.'

Shirley released the hands she had held within her own, and took the small, thin face in custody instead. There were tears in her speech, though not in her eyes, as she continued rapidly,—

'It's no use, gentle Nora. We're both making believe, ready to break our hearts with wretchedness. But we're as strong as lions also, and don't mean to be foolish, do we? That's why we've driven the parting off until the very last. After all, it's only you in France, I in England; we can get at each other in a few hours. If—if, for instance, you were ill, or Neil or Robert were, though none of us mean to be, of course. Except in case you wanted me in a hurry very much, or I wanted you—oh, what nonsense am I talking! You will write every day, won't you? You'll always know that I am thinking of, loving, praying for, my only little sister, whom I understand so well? Quick, quick, the men are coming. Just one more kiss, one

long, long, loving kiss before I go. There, was I not brave? I haven't cried a bit. Only, you will presently, it will do you so much good; do not try to check the tears. Yes, I am coming. Not given you a chance to open those pretty lips? Why should I, when I know every word they would say? See, here is Nevill, to tell you that he has secured the Tolkevitz Villa for next year. Walk down to the railing, when we have quite driven off, and wave to me, there's a pet. We shall be able to see you from the other side of the bridge, with perhaps one peep more when we round the corner. Good-bye, good-bye, my own sweet darling sister.'

There is a long dull street in the north of London, where the houses are fronted with stucco much given to peeling, and whose interiors are cramped and dingy. This street, except when the children romp in the gutters, waltz to organ tunes upon the pavement, or the milkman makes merry with his cans on the kerbstone, is quiet enough by force of circumstances. For it leads nowhere, and neither tradesmen nor dwellers disturb its solitude with vehicular traffic.

As a relief no doubt to its gloominess, this *cul-de-sac* rejoices in the somewhat portentous name of Lady Corisande Street. Although dull, it is eminently respectable; its inhabitants chiefly needy clerks blessed with liberal families, sundry gentlemen connected with the press, who turn night into day from necessity, not choice, a few dressmakers struggling to form a connection with well-regulated consciences as to payment of bills, and an occasional newly-married couple feeling their ways cautiously along the uncertain paths of housekeeping. To the latter class belonged Mr and

Mrs Robert Hossack, who tenanted the first floor of No. 16, a house selected because it was less blotchy than the rest, and it stood further from the gin palace which, of course, graced one corner of Lady Corisande Street.

Possibly Robert and Shirley had been over-cautious in making their very modest start. But they shared a great horror of debt, considering it best to economise from the outset, thereby setting a good example to similar couples launched upon the river of wedlock. Moreover, Lady Corisande Street offered the advantage of being within a penny tram ride of the 'Stag's Head,' whence Shirley's not very numerous but select circle of pupils could be easily reached on foot. That this policy of economy was wise and successful was soon proved. For there was no brighter face or easier footstep in the neighbourhood than the young teacher's; few held their heads more proudly, or devoted their leisure time more lovingly to his wife, than the novelist, who had now resumed his wideawake, declared by Shirley to be the last worn-out reproach to bachelorhood. At first, in her inexperience and intense desire to carry out the programme of retrenchment, the bride wished to dispense altogether with a servant. But Robert would not hear of such a sacrifice, for which there was no possible necessity. Shirley was quite overcome: she thought it would be so delightful to turn domestic, minister personally to her husband's wants. He, in his turn, declared he would never forgive himself the sight of his Shirley undertaking drudgery for his sake—a decision leading to one of those lover's tiffs which always ended in more perfect harmony.

'All my arrangements are altered,' Shirley pouted,

as she glanced round the parlour her good taste had succeeded in making cheerful against incalculable odds of light and the atrocities of the paperhanger. 'Must I again remind you that Nora and I had intended settling down as old maids, with Eliza for our general servant, Tabby purring on the hearthrug, a host of literary and musical reminiscences to console us over our muffins. Now you troublesome men have spoilt everything. Think what you have to answer for.'

'My conscience, at anyrate, lies easy,' answered Robert. 'I fancy also he, whom I still regard as my legacy, considers existing arrangements more satisfactory.'

Week after week of uninterrupted bliss passed rapidly, during which the satisfaction of hard, honest work lent its never-failing zest to their evening meetings. Both made headway in their professions. In addition to his ordinary vocation, Robert secured engagements upon the staffs of more than one high-class magazine. His manuscripts now commanded a sure market ; better still, in his eyes and those of his wife, the approval of that public whose esteem was alone worth gaining. The remembrance of rebuffs, disappointments, injustices, vanished before the fact that he was at last understood and appreciated. Best recompense of all, his success had been won by legitimate means in a healthy school of fiction, in the promotion of which Robert had played no insignificant *rôle*. He had, by sheer industry and perseverance, acquired the art of retaining a firm grip upon his characters ; the power also to interest and hold his reader's attention, without which most writings are in vain. The void in his life filled now he had found his angel, all restlessness and discontent with results dis-

appeared. The pulses of his brain were quickened ; ideas, inspirations, his very soul, seemed lifted higher in the scale whose weights were honourable and true.

As for Shirley, she earned golden opinions wherever she went. Pupils increased and prospered under her tuition. Every day some fresh sign of God's bounty reached her, whereby the will to serve and reverence becomingly became strengthened. During spare hours, which were few, she contrived to call upon most of her former friends. Needless to say, first of all, upon one who was sister rather than friend, Mary Stapleton.

What an accumulation of confidences had to be discussed ; what harmless merriment extracted from present experiences ! The two rejoiced together over all the blessings which had been showered upon them ; the sole dread in the younger's mind lest she were too happy. Abroad, also, all went well. Cheering accounts reached concerning Nora's health, immensely improved under Mediterranean skies, about which, and the climate of the Riviera, the little countess wrote in raptures, in a precise, old-fashioned, yet enthusiastic, strain quite in keeping with her simplicity. Every letter brought some token of affection in the form of flowers, first pressed to the sender's lips, upon which tears had not unfrequently fallen, but not the tears of sorrow or regret. For spring was coming on apace, when, by easy stages, the 'Traveller's Rest' would be reached, and loving arms would be once more entwined, vows of unalterable affection renewed.

Owing to the remarkable business capacities shown by their father, Nora explained that Neil had not found it necessary to go to Musselburgh. Mr Wodehouse had evidently done wonders with the estate—

results fully confirmed by neighbouring landowners they happened to meet at Mentone.

‘What a very providential circumstance it is that Nevill was so fortunate as to secure dear papa’s services,’ wrote little Nora. ‘It is obvious that his special forte lies in administration and economy, with a really remarkable aptitude for figures. Granting that his talents were morally misapplied, one must confess his transactions with those dreadful racing people have stood him in good stead. Moreover, following up the well-intentioned though undeveloped, possibly rather chimerical, impulses which prompted him to establish his unfortunate newspaper, he has instituted religious services in a temporary shed—he trusts the edifice may one day become permanent—for the labourers on the property, their wives and children. Is not that truly philanthropic conduct? Of course dear Nevill has given his unqualified sanction to such discourses. But he seemed somewhat moved when papa went on to ask permission to cut down some timber in order to construct benches for his congregation. I believe my husband was constrained to meet this request with a reluctant refusal, couched, I need not say, in language of the politest.’

It was not surprising either that Nora should record how, amid the stimulating influences of repose and a warm climate, Neil Challoner’s poetic fervour had ripened, prompting him to the execution of verses his wife considered quite spiritual, like their author’s face. That they were of inspired brilliancy only the most unimpressionable would doubt. Then the volume produced by Mr Lafont had sold extensively, besides being loudly praised by press and public. Nora had, further, undergone the delightful sensation of revising

proofs of 'The Valley of Sin,' destined to go forth to the world in May—could words express the nervous anxiety with which she awaited that event? Peace and contentment breathed through little Nora's pages. Spring brought Easter with it; Easter meant a short holiday for her sister. Then they would meet again. Meanwhile the Mediterranean shores might have been searched without success to find so truly loving, lovable a pair as that happy earl and countess. The vows exchanged beside the broad waters of the Elbe had been no empty, childish talk.

One of the first visits returned to Mr and Mrs Hossack was by Miss Pridham, who hobbled down from Hampstead, accompanied by her Devonshire relation, who also wore corkscrew ringlets, and presented a ribstone pippin countenance. Only her curls were not so white as Miss Pridham's, or the cheeks so lined. Rheumatism and advancing years had played havoc with the cheery dame. But she did not mean to be baulked of her trip to Lady Corisande Street—not she. Amazement was far too mild a word to express the ex-nurse's surprise when she had heard of the double marriage. As she expressed herself, 'It was a'most too like story-telling to be true, though perhaps it's scarcely fitting of me to say so, with so many of the young folks following suit.'

Ensconced in Robert's own arm-chair in the sitting-room Shirley hadt ransformed from dark- to brightness, Miss Pridham fairly wept with emotion.

'Don't you take heed to a foolish old woman, my dear. I shall be better presently. When we turned into this street, Martha and me was quite took aback that you should be lodging in such a dreary hole, begging your pardon. Why, you've made it fairy-

land! It's as cosy as my parlour: I can't say stronger than that. Well, I never! To think you're married, and to Mr 'Ossack of all others. It passes make-believe, though once or twice I did think—but that's neither here nor there. Miss Nora, too! Many's the time I've told our Eliza—before she made a fool of herself with that Trickett boy I'd never have allowed inside the gate if I'd known what he was after—to mark my words if she and the curate didn't make a match of it. Now she's taken her fine-born cousin, who, for quiet-going ways, is about as much like an earl, in my opinion, as chalk is to cheese, generous young gentleman as he is; and nobody knows that better than Polly Pridham. Everything's turned out topsy-turvy, no mistake. It's enough to turn my old head, too, which never was over-strong at the best o' times.'

'Why, how can you say that, Miss Pridham, when you managed so splendidly for us? We often say that we should have been unable to get along as we did without your assistance. We shall never forget your kindness; it would be quite impossible.'

'That's like your pretty self, though it's little enough I've done, ma'am—it does seem odd to call you ma'am. Deary me, I suppose, when your sister comes back, you'll all be off north, and I'll never see you again.'

'Certainly not; Mr Hossack and I have our livings to earn, and we are mighty independent, I can tell you. North—yes, we shall come up there pretty often, but no farther than Prospect Cottage. And if we do not get those delicious cakes of yours for tea, we shall be woefully disappointed. Would not your friend—I forget her name; is she Miss or Mrs Somebody—care to be seated?' inquired Shirley, lowering her voice.

'Martha Bolitho's her name; she's a widow from

Mutley, though her people came from Cornwall, and a real good sort she is. When that girl Eliza—'

'Of course I remember; how foolish of me. How do you do, Mrs Bolitho? It is so good of you to have come up all the way from Devonshire to keep Miss Pridham company. Don't you find her looking famous? Won't you sit down? I daresay you've heard all about us, and the days we spent at our beloved Cottage?'

Mrs Bolitho dropped a curtsey, smiled all over her healthy face, and bleated out in approved Devonshire dialect how she had not only heard of that period, but of subsequent generosity which had left her friend high and dry above the waters of want or the worry of baker's bills. Shirley was not quite sure, but she thought the widow from Mutley invoked every possible blessing upon her cousin's head. Mrs Bolitho certainly raised her handkerchief to her eyes and wept, remarking, 'That I dew say, as I've told Polly Pridham here a score o' times.'

'You will give our united, very best regards to the Misses Turnbull, won't you?' was Shirley's injunction as, after regaling her visitors with unlimited tea and potted shrimps, she packed Miss Pridham and her walking-sticks into the cab she insisted they should take. 'Does the red-riding-hood basket exist still? And is Miss Felinda as fond of poking about after mummies—I mean fossils—as ever? You won't forget, will you—many, many regrets at having missed on Sunday, and regards from Mr and Mrs Robert Hossack, of No. 16 Lady Corisande Street, N.W.?'

Mary Stapleton, with her repentant and almost rejuvenated Francis, came often, of course. It was pleasant to see how Mary strove by every tender,

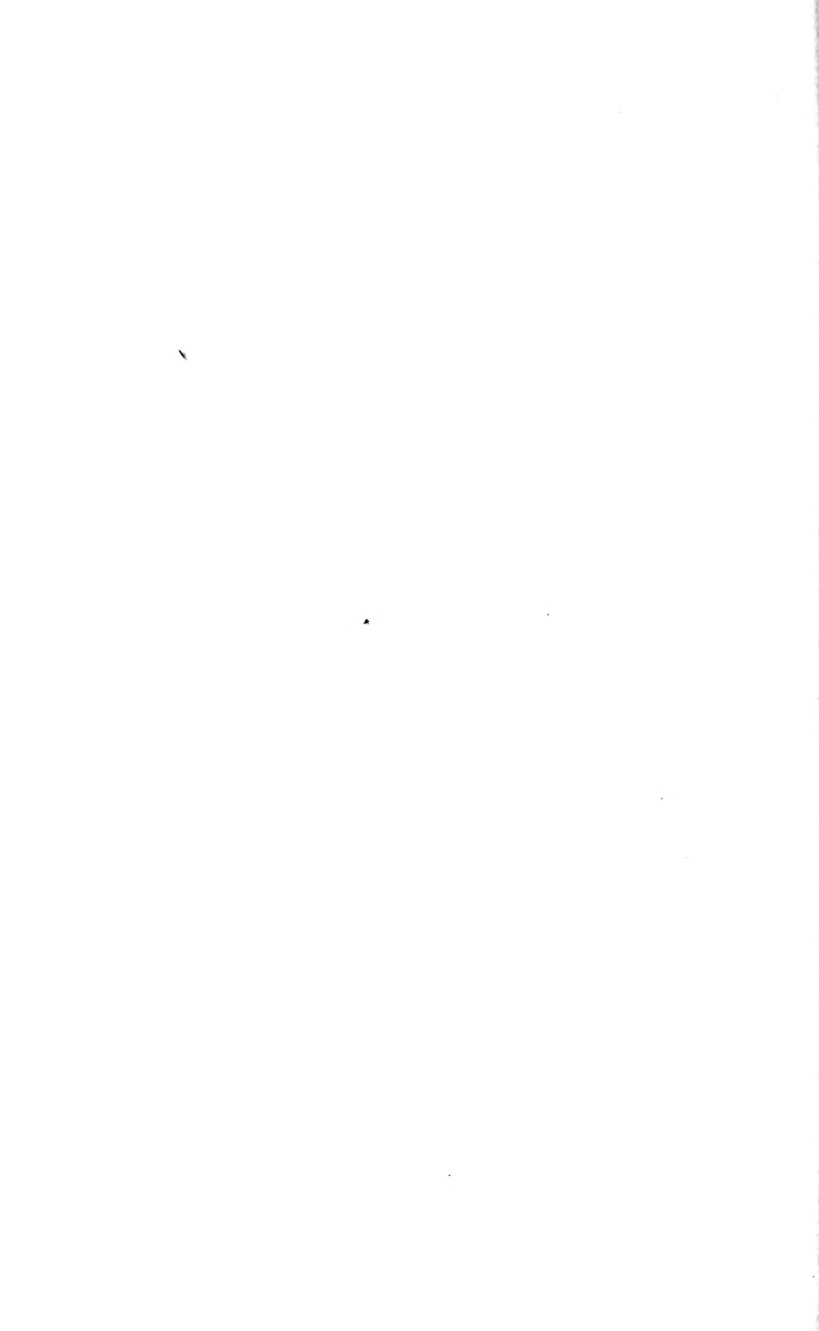
womanly instinct to bury the record of her husband's past. For her part, she had forgiven, and nearly forgotten, everything. If any unguarded reference escaped a stranger, Mary hastened to turn the conversation with that ready tact of which she was mistress. When, in serious mood, Mr Stapleton reverted to any unfortunate subject, she nobly took all blame for the estrangement upon herself. She implored her husband to live only in the present, to banish every troublesome retrospect. Mary Stapleton afforded a superb example of one who, often rescued at the brink of despair, had, under Heaven's shelter, conquered, to find reward unspeakable.

What better time than this to ring down the curtain upon those who have played their parts in these pages? A few have passed from the scene, but they leave only revered memories behind for those who tarry. Of them shall it not be truly written that their battles of life have been fought with a proud trust and independence? That Love, divine, supporting, unfathomable, has shed its lustre upon them throughout their trials, and proved triumphant over all?

THE END.

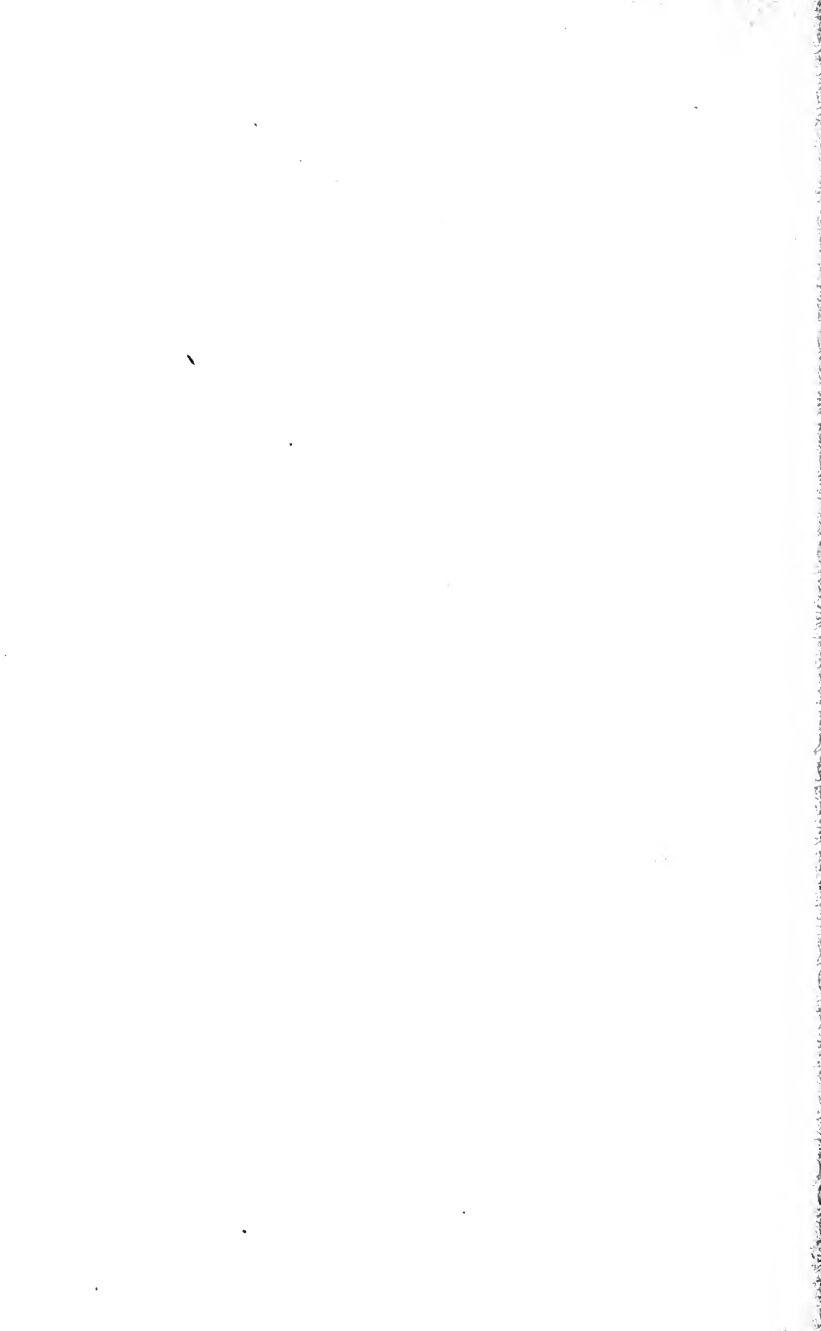
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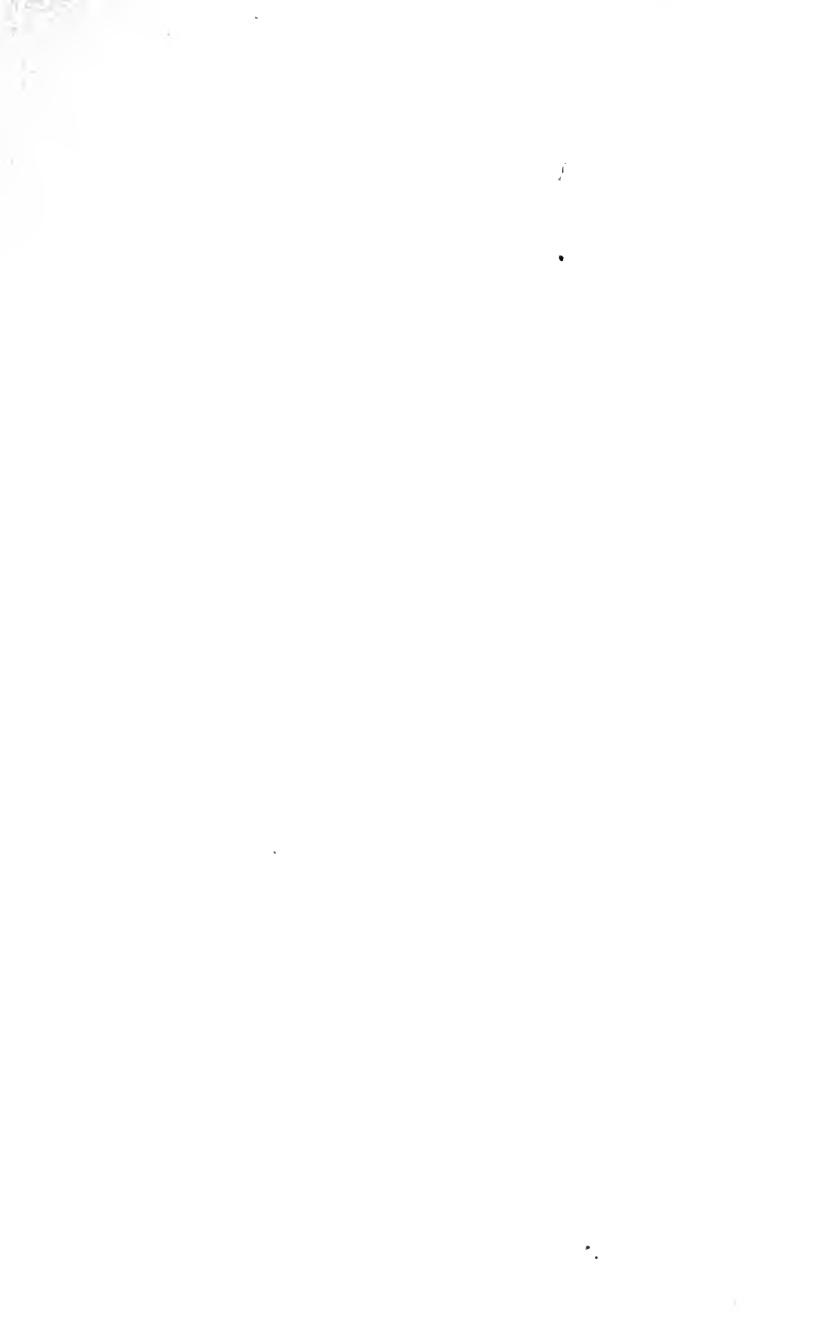
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